

Irish unions seek deal with government to prevent industrial unrest

Dermot Quinn
2 December 2016

Trade unions representing public sector workers have called on Ireland's ruling Fine Gael government to enter talks on pay and conditions relating to more than a quarter of a million public servants.

The unions are demanding the "renegotiation" of the Lansdowne Road Agreement reached with the government in early 2015 and which outlined measures for limited pay restoration for lower paid public sector workers following years of pay cuts and staff reductions. Following a series of one-day stoppages by secondary teachers who are outside the current Lansdowne Road Agreement, nurses and doctors have also been demanding pay increases. The Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation (INMO) and Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation (INMO) are balloting their 37,000 members for industrial action for pay restoration.

Minister for Public Expenditure Paschal Donohoe has reiterated his determination to stick rigidly to the previous agreement with the unions, stating, "The Lansdowne Road agreement is the only agreement that the Government will be honouring and can afford to honour."

The background to the Lansdowne Road Agreement lies in the economic crisis of 2008 and its devastating impact on the parasitic Irish economy, especially the banking sector and the bloated property price bubble. Facing state bankruptcy and economic decline, in 2010 Ireland received a €85 billion bailout from the European Union (EU), International Monetary Fund (IMF) and European Central Bank (ECB).

The cuts to social services that followed and the decline in workers' wages and living standards were largely carried through by the ruling elite with the active cooperation of the unions. When workers resisted these attacks at Aer Lingus, Vita Cortex and

the Energy Supply Board (ESB), the unions betrayed and sold out the workers' interests. They imposed a strike ban in the public sector in 2010 as part of the Croke Park Agreement struck with the government. Billions were slashed in wages and benefits. Pay and pension cuts were introduced and the gross public service pay bill fell from €17.2 billion in 2008 to €14.2 billion in 2013. The workforce was cut by 32,000.

While the unions agreed to billions of euros in pay cuts and layoffs, they also blocked any attempt by the workers concerned to resist by accepting no-strike deals. Lower paid public service workers were hit hardest, suffering the elimination of more than 10 percent of all public sector jobs. In 2013, the unions signed the Haddington Road Agreement after their members decisively repudiated the initial deal negotiated with the government to replace Croke Park. This introduced a further €1 billion in cuts. The public sector unions acceded to all of the government's key demands, including longer working hours, freezes to pay increments, pay cuts for staff members, and so-called redeployment measures that in reality paved the way for job cuts. Productivity measures, including additional hours valued at 6 percent in pay terms, and stricter work practises were introduced. The number of public sector workers fell from 320,000 to less than 290,000.

On November 17 this year, the Services, Industrial, Professional and Technical Union (SIPTU), Ireland's largest union, representing 60,000 public service staff, authorised its groups in the public service to ballot for strike action over pay. President Jack O'Connor did the media round, insisting that the state had enough money to hammer out a better deal for public service workers. The government would have to sit down with the unions in the New Year to renegotiate the Lansdowne

Road Agreement. Bernard Harbor, the head of communications for the Impact union, expanded on these sentiments, saying, “If the government prizes the agreement, and it does, then it will have to do more to protect it.”

The call for a “renegotiation” of the Lansdowne Road Agreement by the unions follows a €40 million pay offer to the Garda (police) to avoid planned strike action. This has been recommended by the Labour Court, which poses as an arbitration body but has a history of anti-worker judgements in industrial disputes. This decision to better fund the repressive state apparatus to ensure its loyalty has been used by the unions to cloak the Labour Court’s long record of implementing wage cuts and job losses.

The muted sabre rattling regarding future strike action will similarly be a cover for SIPTU and the other unions in the public sector concocting a deal with the government which at best will restore only a fraction of the overall cuts to pay and conditions. More no-strike clauses will be added in exchange for this supposed “victory.” While posturing as defenders of the interests of workers, in practise the union bureaucracy is trying to re-establish the “social partnership” agreement with the government it enjoyed before and after 2008.

Enda Kenny’s minority Fine Gael government are already committed to talks in June 2017 when the Lansdowne Road Agreement officially runs out.

The day after Jack O’ Conner of SIPTU announced his strike ballot, the national executive council of the union asked its groups in the public service to postpone the ballots until December 1 to facilitate “further talks by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) and contacts with the government on the pay issue.”

The Civil Public and Services Union (CPSU), with around 13,000 members, posted a circular on its web site on November 23, stating, “Unions agreed measures to help restore the public finances, but the Government committed to ensuring that *when those finances were restored*, the lower paid would be the first to benefit” (emphasis added). Fine Gael is in reality presiding over a severe housing crisis and growing poverty levels, despite an upturn in employment. According to the Economic Research Institute one in every seven of the Irish population (15.2 percent) lives on an income below the official poverty line. Given a population of approximately 4.61 million, this means that just over

700,000 people live at risk of poverty.

The union leaders have been immune to the hardships they have helped to impose on their members. All but one Irish union leader is on a salary of more than €100,000, with the highest paid on a package of just under €200,000. Many receive additional generous expenses and all are in defined benefit pension schemes. While the most devastating austerity measures and pay cuts were being shouldered by the working class in 2009, the head of the Impact union, Peter McLoone, was being paid €171,313 a year. Shay Cody, the current head of Impact, is on €162,062 a year. Irish Bank Officials’ Association (IBOA) head Larry Broderick is the highest paid union leader, at €198,646 annually.

There is no possibility that working people will improve pay and conditions or mount a real struggle against the Irish ruling elite by depending on the unions. It is an illusion from which a growing number of workers have broken. Union membership has now plummeted from a high of 46 percent in 1994 to its present level of 29 percent. Almost 70 percent of these workers are in the public service. A genuine opposition movement can develop only to the extent that working people break organisationally and politically from the unions and build independent organisations of class struggle and a new socialist party.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact