Irish unions sabotage health workers' strikes

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Ireland's largest trade union, the Services, Industrial, Professional and Technical Union (SIPTU), called off three days of strike action planned by over 10,000 hospital support workers this week.

Health workers are demanding up to €3,000 ($3,390) in payments promised by the government under agreements, which include new "job evaluations" for mainly low paid health support workers.

A 24-hour strike by over 10,000 hospital support workers on June 26 caused major disruptions. The strike affected 38 hospitals across the country with porters, chefs, health care assistants, and operating theatre staff mounting pickets. The Health Service Executive (HSE), the management body overseeing the health service, announced that 2,000 surgical and scope procedures were cancelled. Hospitals functioned with reduced outpatient services, catering services and operating theatre procedures.

The one-day stoppage, which had widespread public support, was quickly used by SIPTU to channel the workers' claims into the Works Relations Commission (WRC) and the Labour Court (LC), which are the two main state-sponsored arbitration bodies with a history of anti-working class rulings.

The day after the stoppage Paul Bell, SIPTU health division organiser, announced talks at the WRC. When these talks failed, Fine Gael leader and Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Leo Varadkar expressed his irritation at SIPTU for not heading to the Labour Court and submitting to arbitration before the one-day strike took place.

Varadkar complained, "Where disputes cannot be resolved, where they are intractable, where it has not been possible to find a compromise in the WRC, in the past we have gone to the Labour Court. The employer's side, the Government side, is willing to go to the Labour Court for a binding determination and we regret that the union side is not. It is unusual for a union to refuse to go to the Labour Court."

The next day (June 28) SIPTU was back in the WRC. The following day SIPTU dutifully went to the Labour Court and called off any further strike action.

The greatest fear of the union heads is that without their involvement, the ruling class will not be able to control the anger and frustration of workers locked in these bureaucratic structures. Since the onset of the global economic crisis in 2008, the unions have blocked every attempt by working people to defend their living standards while betrayed those struggles that have emerged. In February this year, nurses and midwives expressed their anger in street protests when the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation (INMO) called off strikes after brokering deals in the Labour Court in line with government policy.

Over the past decade SIPTU and the Irish Congress of Trade Unions have presided over a sharp decline in the conditions of hospital care workers.

In 2013, SIPTU and the other public service unions signed up to the Haddington Road Agreement and acceded to all the then Fine Gael government's demands to impose draconian conditions on health workers, 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. This was brokered between the government and the unions following the 2008 crisis and its devastating impact on the 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

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cooperation of the unions. The agreement imposed €1 billion in cuts and a three-year pay freeze.

Faced with widespread opposition from public service workers, the unions once more entered a pact with the Fine Gael government in 2008 and signed up to the Public Service Stability Agreement (PSSA), which runs to 2020. This was carried out under the pretext that a phased restoration of pay cuts and working standards would be introduced. Simon Harris, the Minister for Health, praised the collusion of the unions and recently remarked, “It appears that almost 90 percent of staff who saw their pay cut will see on average three-quarters of that pay reduction restored in 2019.”

But almost 13,000 workers who are indirectly employed by the HSE will not receive full pay restoration until October 2021. As outlined by the WRC, in cooperation with the unions a provision is included that “no individual will receive an increase that exceeds the loss that was previously imposed.”

The unions have used state-sponsored bodies such as the WRC and the Labour Court as the routine mechanism by which the dictates of the Fine Gael government and ruling elite are imposed on workers. The one-day stoppage is used to cover up their collaboration with these establishment bodies.

Christine Carr-Donohoe, who is a ward supervisor in the Dublin’s Rotunda maternity hospital, outlined the frustration and anger of health workers to the *Irish Independent* .

“In the downturn, the government took a lot of money off, they never took on new staff, we were all upskilled and they promised we would be paid for the upskilling and based on the grade we were now on and then they didn’t. They owe us like 15.8 million and they offered us 1.8 million. We are out here for everyone, they want the same services, but we need the money, we want fair pay. In taxes alone, every two weeks I’d say I pay around €800, it’s a big chunk out of your money. I travel from Drogheda every day, petrol costs me like €100 for every two weeks. They took back around €400 a month in taxes, and we are here for fair pay. I can’t remember the last time we had a family holiday. I never have any money.”

The only way forward for Irish workers is to decisively break with the moribund union structures and independently challenge the continuing attacks on living standards and essential services, by building new organisations of struggle and fighting for a socialist alternative to the capitalist system.

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