Irish government plans full return to work by August

Dermot Quinn
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On June 8, the Irish Taoiseach (prime minister) Leo Varadkar, leader of the current Fine Gael government, will instigate Phase Two of a five phase plan to exit from the coronavirus lockdown.

Under Phase One, 1,500 retail shops reopened on May 18 along with outdoor workers, including construction workers, returning to sites. Varadkar's government is planning to reopen further shops and businesses, with a full opening up of the economy in Phase Five of the plan by August 10. Schools and colleges will reopen in September.

Varadkar told the Dáil [parliament] last week that the government's mission was to get "business open again" and "get the economy humming." But he is not moving quickly enough for business. The Irish Business and Employers Confederation (IBEC) has insisted that the government bring forward the phases of reopening of the economy and scrap the two-week quarantine restrictions for people entering the country.

There have been over 25,000 confirmed cases of the coronavirus in Ireland, almost half in Dublin. Almost 8,000 have been among healthcare workers. Of the 1,650 deaths from the pandemic, one of the highest death-to-infection ratios globally, the old and infirm have suffered greatly with 62 percent of deaths occurring in nursing and residential homes. Northern Ireland has seen approaching 5,000 cases and over 500 deaths. Around half have been in care homes.

The scandalous treatment of the old and infirm in nursing homes led Dr. Marcus De Brun to resign from the Irish Medical Council in late April. On May 30, it was widely reported that Dr. De Brun had released a memo from the Health Service Executive (HSE) showing that doctors in care homes were instructed that if one resident tested positive for the virus, others should not be tested as it was assumed they already had it.

The decision not to test cost the deaths of 52 residents in the North Dublin nursing home to which he was attached. Dr. De Brun stated last week, "Residents I had put on the list to be tested were being booted off the list without me being informed. To be denied the possibility of testing, to figure out if this COVID or not COVID, that created huge difficulties for the sector and certainly for the nursing staff and any hopes of isolation."

Just two weeks ago, more than 600 coronavirus infections were reported in 12 meat processing plants across the country. Frigid temperatures, cramped conditions, and long hours put meat processing workers internationally in danger as the super-rich seek to rake in profits at any cost.

The collaboration of Varadkar's caretaker government with the bosses who own and control the meat plants came sharply into focus last week. Irish Chief Medical Officer Tony Holohan revealed that the Health Service Executive (HSE) was running a practice whereby COVID-19 test results of workers were being given to the companies instead of to the workers concerned. In many cases the first time that workers heard of their positive diagnosis was from the company and not from the HSE.

Even though this was condemned by the Data Protection Commission as "not legitimate", Minister for Health Simon Harris condoned the arrangement stating baldly, "It has been necessary in the interests of public health to give the results of confirmed cases of Covid-19 to the management of meat plants."

There is widespread anger among working people at the callous indifference shown to workers and young people by the ruling elite. It is four months since the Irish general election on February 8 which resulted in

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Varadkar's governing Fine Gael party coming third in the poll, both in seats and in first preference votes. Even before the pandemic, the vote reflected working people's anger at a growing housing and homeless crisis, coupled with a deterioration of the health services and all aspects of social care.

In response, the two main bourgeois nationalist parties, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, are posed to abandon their already nominal differences—resting on a historical division over the Irish border and Civil War—and concentrate on jointly implementing the dictates of the ruling elite. The Green Party are holding talks with both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael and are seeking to enter government with them. Sinn Fein, who have no fundamental differences with the talks' participants, won the election with some left posturing but have thus far been excluded.

The talks between the three parties are to be concluded in two weeks. Varadkar and Simon Harris have set the agenda of future policies by scrapping the state takeover of private hospitals implemented at the start of the pandemic with the aim of returning the sector to private interests.

A right-wing ideological barrage against workers opened last week when Varadkar outlined to the Dáil an extension to the €350 COVID-19 pandemic unemployment payment beyond June 8. The temporary payment, introduced in March, is paid weekly to laid off and self-employed workers. As of mid-May, around 585,000 were in receipt of it. In total, 1.26 million workers are relying on state support for all or part of their income through various similar schemes, including a wage subsidy scheme for which 54,000 employers registered.

Varadkar insisted the €350 payment would be cut by the next incoming government because some workers were better off on the payment than when working. Varadkar sniped, "I have heard stories of people who have asked their employers to lay them off, because they would be better off on the €350 payment. I would say to anyone who is thinking that, we are all in this together, and nobody in any walk of life should seek to be better off, or seek to make a profit out of this crisis."

Varadkar was supported last Saturday by the *Irish Independent* newspaper which gave a two-page spread to Pat McDonagh, owner of Irish burger chain Supermac's. McDonagh, who spoke in opposition to the continued payment and whose estimated wealth is €117 million, compared the emergency pandemic payment of €350 for low paid workers during the pandemic to being like "winning the lotto."

The social policy of the Varadkar government, which is willing to dispose of the elderly, the sick, and the immune-compromised, while attacking workers' conditions on behalf of the financial elite, will continue with the aid of the rest of the political establishment—likely with the forming of the three party coalition government. An indication of any new government's agenda can be drawn out from the fact that talks with the Greens are reported to be dragging on over finance, levels of social protection, the state deficit, the pension age and carbon emissions. Last time the Greens were in power, they assisted Fianna Fáil in launching billions of euros of austerity measures in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis.

Workers in Ireland, North and South, find themselves irreconcilably opposed to the economic interests of the Irish capitalist class and the capitalist system. Fighting the pandemic and the assault on jobs, wages and benefits requires that Irish workers mobilize independently, form rank-and-file action committees in every workplace and seek to unite as a class in Ireland and internationally.

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