

Irish government rejects medical experts as coronavirus infections spiral out of control

Dermot Quinn
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Last week, Micheál Martin's Irish coalition government, made up of Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil and the Green Party, introduced new COVID-19 restrictions. The Level 3 restrictions in the Republic of Ireland (RoI) prevent people travelling outside their county unless 'absolutely necessary'.

The policy was implemented suddenly. On October 6, Gardaí (police) set up 130 static checkpoints on motorways and other arterial routes around Dublin and throughout the country. Fines for travelling outside the county boundary have been introduced.

The rate of infection has been steadily growing. There have now been 42,528 confirmed infections and 1,826 deaths from the disease in the RoI. In Northern Ireland, 20,158 people have been infected, including 5,909 recorded over the past week, while 588 have died.

In the RoI, the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE), which is comprised of a broad range of medical experts and consultants, has warned that Ireland could experience up to 1,300 new Covid-19 cases per day by the end of October. On Saturday, new infections broke through the 1,000 mark with 1,011 cases recorded—followed by 877 cases and 3 deaths on Monday.

Fearing the situation was spiralling out of control, Tony Holohan, the chief medical officer on behalf of NPHE, issued a statement October 4 warning that the entire country should be moved to the most severe level of restrictions. These are outlined in the government's five-stage roadmap for fighting the disease. NPHE proposed that a return to the lockdown seen in March of this year should be implemented immediately with all non-essential businesses closed.

Since the first clusters of the virus spread in March, NPHE was promoted by both Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Micheál Martin and Tánaiste (Deputy Prime Minister) Leo Varadkar as the bedrock of the advice they would follow in trying to suppress the infection.

Martin's government rejected NPHE's advice for a full lockdown. Varadkar, speaking to RTE's Claire Byrne, denounced NPHE, cynically commenting, 'While NPHE are experts in health, none of them would have faced being on the Pandemic Unemployment Payment' should Level 5 be introduced, and 'none of them would have to tell somebody they were losing their job'.

This is in line with the drive throughout Europe by the ruling class to force workers back to work and reopen schools and universities under conditions where everyone knows the virus is rapidly spreading.

Outbreaks among workers in Ireland's multi-billion-euro meat industry have escalated over the summer. These include O'Brien Fine Foods in County Kildare, where 80 workers tested positive, Kildare Chilling, where 150 were infected, and the Irish Dog Food factory, also in Kildare. Counties Laois, Offaly and Kildare were put under local lockdown for a fortnight, and access to the counties restricted to work, farm or medical reasons.

The Irish Central Statistics Office (CSO) issued figures in August indicating that almost half (46 percent) of new coronavirus infections and deaths were linked to a workplace outbreak, with the median age of new cases being under 40.

In response, the trade unions have deepened their collaboration with food industry management and joined forces to ensure that plants are kept operating to the greatest extent possible. The Services Industrial Professional and Technical Union (SIPTU) met with Meat Industry Ireland in August to agree, according to SIPTU organiser Carl Ennis, a 'joint charter to deal with the nuances in the industry around COVID-19.' Ennis's 'nuances' amounted to intermittent testing of workers for infection, and minimal commitments on sick pay in return for ensuring plants were kept open.

SIPTU agreed this even while Ennis acknowledged the dire conditions facing workers, particularly East European

employees in Ireland's food plants. He told the *Irish Times* that workers 'remain petrified of contracting COVID-19 but feel that they must walk that tightrope every day and in many cases attend work, even if they are feeling unwell.' Ennis continued 'I have never seen an industry where workers are so reluctant to come out front and talk to the media or to union officials about their concerns and that is a scandal.'

Given the role of the trade unions in Ireland, Britain and internationally in collaborating with employers in keeping plants open during a pandemic, and their role in assisting in employers attacks on jobs, wages and conditions going back decades, it is little wonder that the last organisations that super-exploited workers would turn to for assistance is the unions.

Irish Congress of Trade Unions general secretary Patricia King told an Oireachtas (parliament) committee that regular testing, provision of personal protective equipment, sick pay for self-isolation and some unannounced Health and Safety Authority (HSA) checks were all that was required. King took no steps to ensure those minimal measures were enforced, while it emerged that HSA tests were generally flagged to management in advance.

Testing in food plants was temporarily suspended in September, with the Health Service Executive citing capacity issues. During that month, Dawn Meats in Waterford reported a 'significant' outbreak with 20 to 30 cases reported in the food processing plant. Dawn Meats continued to operate with the company merely stating that facilities 'undergo weekend deep cleaning'. Also in September, Sinn Féin deputy leader Pearse Doherty told the Dáil (lower house) that an unnamed factory logged 226 cases in July. Doherty added, 'We understand that plant is in Cork, and that it was never closed down'. Tánaiste Leo Varadkar denounced Doherty's claim as 'paranoid fantasy'.

Schools opened as scheduled the same month. Education Minister Stephen Donnelly insisted, 'The advice from public health doctors is very clear on schools—they must reopen. There is a lot of evidence about the positive impact of schools on children's development, mental health and education.' Donnelly also authorised handouts to local business.

Before Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, the two main bourgeois nationalist parties, formed their coalition on June 27 this year, Varadkar headed the Fine Gael government. His government pushed for a return to work across all sectors of the economy as far back as May.

Varadkar insisted that the "government mission was to get business open again and get the economy humming."

The resurgence of the virus, perceptible as early as July, has been devastating to the living standards and quality of life of workers. The drive of the super-rich to maximise profits and propagate the lie that "we are all in this together" has led to a further spread of the virus in workplaces and in communities. National hospital waiting lists numbers have reached over 819,000 up from a pre-virus figure of 700,000.

The resurgence is a direct result of the coalition's elevation of the interests of big business and the wealthy ruling elite. This policy has been enforced by the trade unions, while NPHEC advice is discarded when it threatens to interfere with profits.

Besides fear of the disease, public anger has intensified at the hypocrisy of the ruling elite. On August 20, the *Irish Examiner* reported a two-day event in which 81 guests made up of TDs (members of parliament), ex-TDs and senators wined and dined at a special golf dinner at the exclusive Station House Hotel in Clifden County Galway. The attendees breached their own restrictions allowing no more than 50 at a gathering. Others present included Supreme Court judge Séamus Woulfe, European Commissioner for Trade Phil Hogan and Minister for Agriculture and deputy leader of Fianna Fáil, Dara Calleary.

Workers in Ireland are faced with a government in a continual state of crisis whose policy is to let the markets function as smoothly possible and corporations to rack up super-profits while coronavirus infection runs riot. This is at the core of Varadkar's attack on NPHEC and other health experts. The policy of Ireland's ruling elite, as in the rest of Europe, is one of "herd immunity," with the working class paying a bitter price.



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