

Irish teachers vote to strike as infection rates spiral

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Schools in the Republic of Ireland (RoI) reopened last week after a two-week mid-term break, despite secondary teachers voting for strike action against dangerous working conditions if COVID-19 related safety measures were not put in place by October 30.

Some 6,759 teachers, members of the Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland (ASTI), voted by a large majority to support action up to and including strike action in seeking:

- Redefinition of "close contact" as being more than 15 minutes in a classroom with a positive COVID-19 case
- A serial testing programme for schools
- Guaranteed test turnaround times of 24 hours
- Provision for high-risk teachers to teach from home or have "reasonable accommodations" in school
- Free laptops in the event of students and teachers self-isolating or schools closing

However, the belated ASTI ballot, announced September 19, was a smokescreen to obscure the role ASTI's leadership, like that of all the trades unions, has played in fully complying with government demands to reopen schools as the coronavirus pandemic spreads.

Despite teachers having voted, by clear majorities, to strike, ASTI President Ann Piggott went on TV with the opposite message. She told Susan Keogh of Newstalk Breakfast: "I want to assure every parent in this country that second-level schools will definitely be open on Monday morning and the ASTI shall not stop them opening. If we do strike, it's a very last resort, we have no intention of closing schools."

The union is also working in close collaboration with the Irish government.

Immediately after the vote, Taoiseach (prime minister) Micheál Martin took the same line as Piggott. Martin insisted the schools would open regardless of

the vote and said there was a "good working relationship between all sides, and there is a determination on all sides to keep our schools open." This was, according to Martin a "very, very important national objective for the country."

The Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO), which has around 47,000 members, is also functioning as a conduit for government policy. On the day of the ASTI teachers' strike vote, INTO General Secretary John Boyle issued a statement which did not mention the ASTI vote at all. Rather, he merely insisted, "It is beholden on the government to match its desire to keep schools open with a commitment to working with education stakeholders and to resourcing the system to best deal with the effects of the pandemic in primary and special schools."

What this "commitment to education stakeholders" amounted to was a Health Service Executive telephone line that school principals alone could use if they have a case of COVID-19 in their school. INTO insisted this number should not be made available to teachers, parents or pupils, clearly with the intention of ensuring schools remain open if at all possible.

For their part, the Teachers Union of Ireland took the same stance, calling on November 3 for "ongoing, robust engagement" between unions, the Department of Education and public health authorities to "ensure that the concerns of teachers are fully addressed."

This is despite dangerous infection rates across the country.

Having rejected repeated demands from the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) for an intensified lockdown, the government suddenly changed its mind late last month with reports of a "rapid deterioration" in the situation and a recognition that hospitals and intensive care units were rapidly

filling up.

The latest figures from the Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC) record 64,538 infections in the RoI and 1,940 deaths. Although the infection rate has somewhat slowed, last Friday, November 6, another 499 cases and 8 deaths were recorded. Around 4.3 percent of tests carried out in the last week were positive. Of the new cases, 175 were in Dublin, 72 in Cork, 29 in Limerick, 26 in Mayo, and 21 in Meath, with the remainder spread across the country.

Mirroring the actions of governments across Europe, in October the government introduced belated and partial lockdown measures aimed at curbing social interaction and travel while keeping business and production running, schools open and profits flowing. These included a 5km restriction on travel, no visitors apart from extended households, and no organised outdoor or indoor events apart from weddings and funerals. Cafes, bars and restaurants are restricted to takeaways and deliveries.

The government also handed the police power to call on homes and break up indoor gatherings, which are now an offence under new legislation drawn up last month. 2,500 extra officers are now on duty with powers to impose on-the-spot fines and prison sentences.

This is in line with corporate media and government insistence that the majority of outbreaks are in the home.

Yet, after schools opened in August, after the summer break, public health officials announced, as early as September 19, that outbreaks had taken place at four schools in Cork. Cases have escalated in the subsequent weeks. In all some, 599 cases have been detected in Ireland's 4,000 or so primary and secondary schools, and 156 clusters—meaning more than one case per school—recorded. Thirty of these were recorded last week alone and 125 of the clusters remain active.

Other institutions are also dangerously infected.

Some 41 of 500 prison officers and staff at Midlands Prison in Portlaoise have either tested positive, have symptoms or are self isolating. Five inmates of 810 have also tested positive. The prison authorities have restricted movements in the jail and cut time inmates can spend outside their cells. The Midlands infection is thought to have spread from a disciplinary meeting attended by one prisoner and three staff members. The

RoI has 13 prisons and this is the first case in which internal transmission has been confirmed.

Five nursing homes are reported as facing serious "red" outbreaks, according to HSE officials, while another 35 have "amber" outbreaks. A "red" outbreak is deemed to be occurring when, as well as positive COVID-19 cases, the home has staff shortages, PPE shortages or poor infection control. Around one half of all COVID-19 cases have been in nursing homes.

On November 6 it was reported that three mental health units had to close to new admissions after 55 cases were detected amongst patients and staff. 18 people have died from COVID-19 in mental health units since the start of the pandemic.

Overall, 1 in 5 of COVID-19 infections has been amongst healthcare workers. The HSE reported on October 21, the day the current lockdown was introduced, that there were 1,697 health workers off work with the virus. This was five times higher than the summer level. Ireland has one of the highest rates of diagnosed healthcare worker infection in Europe. The health unions have been as complicit in this as their teaching counterparts.

Thousands of cases have also been reported in meatpacking plants.

Workers cannot go forward with the trade unions. New rank-and-file organisations, committees of action, independent of management and the trade union apparatus are urgently required. They must seek the broadest mobilisation of the working class, across sectors, industries, communities, and national borders, to oppose the ruling class policies of "herd immunity" and mass killing. In this, as in all matters, workers in Ireland face a common struggle with their class brothers and sisters across Europe and internationally.

We call on teachers, parents and students to join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee established by the Socialist Equality Party today and make plans to attend our next online meeting on Saturday, November 14 at 2pm.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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