Delta variant surges as Irish government prepares to cut workers’ benefits

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Last week as the Delta variant of Covid continued to spread internationally, Ireland's Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil, and Green Party coalition reluctantly postponed lifting the final phase of public health restrictions, scheduled for July 5, which would have seen the reopening of indoor restaurants and pubs.

The token delay in no way confronts the growing threat posed by the Delta variant, which now accounts for over 50 percent of daily infections in Ireland.

The National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHET), the overall medical professional body advising the government, warned last week of 'a peak of deaths in August' with projections showing the variant infecting 'thousands of people per day'. Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Micheál Martin, who leads Ireland's coalition government, told the Dáil (parliament), 'I spoke... with Nicola Sturgeon First Minister of Scotland and she used a very telling phrase. She said Delta will rip through an unvaccinated population. All their eggs are in the vaccination basket'.

Even this was too much for Ryanair boss Michael O'Leary. The billionaire airline CEO rubbished NPHET’s warnings as a 'variant scariant' narrative in an open letter to Transport Minister Eamon Ryan. Earlier this year, O'Leary complained that NPHET was disseminating misinformation, 'scare stories' and stoking 'mass hysteria,' despite much evidence that hasty opening of travel restrictions contributed to the second COVID wave.

As of July 1, there have been 5,000 deaths from Covid-19 in Ireland. A further 448 infections were reported on Thursday, with 44 hospitalised and 14 in [intensive care units. Chief Medical Officer Dr Tony Holohan warned Taoiseach Martin that despite the vaccination programme the 'black cloud of the Delta variant loomed as a clear threat... The rise in the number of cases in the past week is following a similar pattern that is being seen across a number of European countries.'

Delta is proven to be 40 to 60 percent more infectious than the Alpha strain, previously the dominant variant in Ireland. Despite this, the government, with broad support from Sinn Fein, the main parliamentary opposition, has opened up almost all workplaces and schools, thereby gambling with the lives of millions of workers for the sake of profit. Only about 44 percent of Irish adults have been fully vaccinated.

The strategy from business and the ruling elite is to push the lowest paid and most exploited workers back to work. These workers are mainly young and unvaccinated. The government is also aiming to claw back from working people the greater portion of the huge debt burden the state has accrued during the pandemic.

In March, the European Commission reported that Ireland is forecast to have run up a total government debt of €241.6 billion for 2021, up almost 10 percent on 2020. This amounts to €48,291 this year per person, which is the highest across the European Union and higher than the UK. It is forecast to rise a further € 1,509 per person in 2022. Martin told a business function last week that 'the level of spending by the Government during the pandemic, is 'not sustainable' and must 'move to the next stage'.

The 'next stage' as outlined by Martin and other representatives of corporate interests will swiftly emerge as a huge attack on workers living standards and rights in order to maintain the flow of profits. Last month the government introduced a series of measures including the cutting of Covid-19 jobless benefit, increases in taxes on the family home, the lifting of eviction restrictions on landlords introduced at the start of the pandemic, and a draconian increase in the powers of the Gardaí (Police).

Last week, the Gardaí set up vehicle checkpoints (Multi Agency Vehicle Checks) targeting recipients of social welfare entitlements, including Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP). This payment was first introduced in March of 2020, to compensate those who lost all their employment due to the Covid-19. To enforce a full return to work, particularly in low-paying jobs, the coalition government last month outlined its intention to cut the PUP in September and November. Workers receiving just €250 per week will see a cut of €50 euro to bring them down to a subsistence unemployment benefit rate.

In June, as tens of thousands of workers returned to work at bars, restaurants, cafés, gyms, swimming pools, leisure centres, cinemas, theatres and more, a widespread propaganda campaign from the corporate media pushed the lie that thousands were falsely claiming PUP.

The *Irish Mail on Sunday*, for example, ran a front page tribute to the far-right businessman and owner of the Supermac's chain, Pat McDonagh, who has attacked the meagre PUP payment to workers made jobless by the pandemic. The banner headline read, 'Supermac's Boss: 'Covid Payments claimed By Fraudsters''

While workers are facing immediate reductions in benefit, as rent and mortgage debts pile up, the government has developed a host of schemes benefiting the corporations and rich.

At the beginning of this month the coalition outlined a €3.6 billion package of spending supports to boost the Irish economy in the form of further grants to employers. Part of the package is an extension of the Emergency Wage Subsidy Scheme introduced in March 2020 at the start of the pandemic which gives a flat rate subsidy to employers. These latest generous subsidies to business can be added to a long list of grants and loans now estimated at €8.5 billion.

Danny McCoy, CEO of the Irish Business and Employers Confederation (IBEC), Ireland's largest lobby and business group, welcomed the giveaway, telling the *Irish Times*, 'Focus must now turn to ensuring the activation of the labour market and safely returning workers to the workplace as swiftly as possible.'

While handouts to business run to billions, there is deepening poverty in the working class. A new report from Oxfam shows the fortunes of Ireland's billionaires rising €3.3 billion since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. Jim Clarken, CEO of Oxfam Ireland, told RTE news recently: 'a rich elite are riding out the pandemic in safety, while those on the frontline are struggling to pay the bills and put food on the table. In Ireland, the fallout from the pandemic on employment has disproportionately hit young adults as well as people in low-paid occupations, all of whom are more likely to be paying rent'.

Latest figures from advocacy group Social Justice Ireland predict that due to the pandemic the unemployment toll will increase by the end of this year to 390,000, or 16.1 percent of the workforce. This is far beyond the highest rate recorded during the banking crash and economic meltdown in 2008 when unemployment in Ireland peaked at 14.6 percent.

The political parties of the Irish establishment and financial elite as represented by Micheál Martin's coalition could not function without the tactical support of Sinn Féin, the main bourgeois opposition party. Sinn Féin leader Mary Lou McDonald again proved that she is a safe bet for the establishment and the financial elite when speaking in the Dáil last Wednesday. She limited her remarks on the crisis to the government merely being 'unfair' to 'young people'.

'The time has come to stop paying lip service to young people and to listen to them and to meet their needs. I am asking you to treat young people fairly', McDonald said.