

One day public sector strike brings Northern Ireland to a standstill

Steve James**19 January 2024**

The Thursday, January 18 one-day “generalised strike” in Northern Ireland saw over 170,000 public service workers, members of 16 trade unions, bring the six counties to a standstill.

The entire public transport network was brought to a halt. Nearly every school and further education college was closed. Health trusts reduced their service to “life and limb” only emergencies, with many operations and appointments cancelled. With public transport out of action many shops, offices and businesses were empty or closed for the day.

Despite the cold weather, pickets were held at many transport and council depots, train stations, schools, hospitals, ambulance stations and public buildings.

Well attended and enthusiastic marches and rallies were held in Belfast, Derry, Ballymena, Omagh, Magherafelt and Enniskillen. Hundreds of workers from Belfast City Hospital joined a feeder march to attend the main rally outside Belfast City Hall. En route, the march was joined by Translink workers from Great Victoria Street and teachers and support staff from the Royal Belfast Academical Institution. Another feeder march came from a rally outside the Northern Ireland Office at Erskine House. Between 5,000 and 6,000 rallied in Belfast, while 1,000 met in Enniskillen. Action continued into Friday with around 800 transport workers, cleaners and classroom assistants and hundreds more gritter drivers, members of the Unite and GMB unions, remaining on strike for another day.

Although for most workers restricted to one day, or in the case of health workers, only till 1pm on Thursday afternoon, the strike—the largest in the history of Northern Ireland—sent shock waves across the UK and Ireland, and points to an increasingly tense political situation.

The strike, directed towards pay demands suppressed because of the two year suspension of the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive in Stormont, drew support from both Catholic and Protestant, Republican and Loyalist “communities”. It represented an implicit rejection of the entire sectarian framework of official politics, enshrined in the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, and the undemocratic

apparatus of capitalist rule in the North.

A paramedic, Eddie Richmond, voiced this sentiment to the *Irish Times*. “I think the fact we know the money is there and know this Tory government isn’t for bending to whatever demands are made of them, by whoever... it’s a terrible indictment of our politics”. He continued “it’s not about green, it’s not about orange anymore. It’s about the haves and the have-nots—and the haves don’t seem to care about the have-nots.”

From the standpoint of the union leaderships, the strike was intended to send an urgent message to the Northern Ireland parties and the British government of the class pressures building up. Strikes have been held in sector after sector over the last two years, and none have been able to extract pay increases remotely in line with workers' needs.

Every dispute has been headed off, and every public service run down, in the context of the dispute between the hard right Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and the British government over Brexit and the Northern Ireland protocol. The DUP walked out of, and thereby suspended, the power sharing Executive in early 2022 against the Windsor Framework which set out different customs rules for imported goods intended for Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic.

The framework was intended to stabilise UK relations with both the European Union and the United States, enflamed by Brexit. For the DUP, however, the framework amounted to a border in the Irish Sea, thereby, from the unionist standpoint, compromising Northern Ireland's position as part of the UK.

In response, the British government effectively froze payments from London to Stormont, meaning that public sector workers and service users in Northern Ireland have been targeted for particularly savage real terms pay cuts and service decimation, even in comparison with the rest of the UK. The fact that 16 unions finally agreed to simultaneous action, albeit only for one day, was a signal that their capacity to suppress the class struggle is reaching its limits.

In line with this, the rallies featured a clutch of union officials making maximum use of left demagogic, while

seeking to build illusions in a revived assembly.

NIPSA General Secretary Patrick Mulholland told strikers outside the Northern Ireland Office, “Today is only the beginning. If we do not get social and economic justice, the struggle will continue. Today: a public sector general strike. Tomorrow: everybody general strike... We are taking on the issue of the disintegration of the social fabric of our society and we show no fear.”

Unison's regional general secretary, Patricia McKeown told the Belfast rally, “I don't remember when we went to the polls last time any political party standing on a platform which said we will impoverish the people of Northern Ireland, we will wreck equal pay for public sector workers, we will run down the National Health Service, we will neglect our schools and social care system, our public services.”

Owen Reidy, general secretary of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions told the Belfast rally, “I do sincerely hope Stormont comes back, but if it does come back it has to be different, it has to treat public sector workers and all workers across Northern Ireland with respect.”

At the time of writing, 12 reactionaries in the leadership of the DUP, the party officers including leader Sir Jeffrey Donaldson, Lord Nigel Dodds, Sammy Wilson and Emmie Little-Pengelly are due to meet to decide whether to go back into government.

At issue is whether the British government is offering enough for the DUP to accept a Sinn Fein First Minister in Stormont and the Windsor Framework trade barriers, or whether to allow the standoff to drag on indefinitely. But should the DUP accept the British government proposal, a further split in unionism, between pro-Stormont DUP elements and harder line loyalists, is likely.

Should Stormont be revived, however, Northern Ireland Secretary, Chris Heaton-Harris has made clear that the devolved assembly and executive will be tasked with accelerating privatisations delayed during the suspension.

If the DUP walks away again, Heaton-Harris has indicated legislation will be brought to Westminster allowing for Northern Ireland elections to be again delayed and some marginal changes made to the current budget. The British government will also be deeply concerned that the Northern Ireland strike could serve as a precedent in the UK where, thus far, the unions have prevented any similar action.

The rallies were also used by the pseudo-left groups to bolster the trade unions themselves. Eamonn McCann, of People before Profit, for decades a prominent figure within the state-capitalist Socialist Workers Movement, spoke to the Derry rally and told the *Belfast Telegraph*, We have been the sleeping giant of Northern Ireland society... “People talk all the time of the need to bring the two communities

together. Well, here we are. We are the peace process. We are the organisation of the future.”

He continued, “It is often forgotten that the trade union movement is bigger than all the political parties and orders, orange and green in Northern Ireland, put together. We've got 200,000 members, we've got 34 registered trade unions, we're bigger than them... We should make sure this is the beginning of it, and the beginning of a decisive trade union intervention in the public affairs of Northern Ireland.”

The desire among workers to overcome the divisions between Catholics and Protestants and pursue the class struggle against capital cannot proceed under the leadership of the trade union bureaucracy that has for decades systematically adapted itself to the needs of both British imperialism and the Irish ruling class in the partitioned island.

Simultaneous with McCann's tub thumping, public sector unions trade unions in the Irish republic representing some 385,000 public sector workers and civil servants facing impossible living costs, have been offered a mere 8.5 percent, sub inflation, pay “increase” over two years by the Irish government. According to SIPTU Deputy General Secretary John King, the offer would increase the wages of low paid workers by as little as €5 per week. The unions, in talks with the Workplace Relations Commission, are seeking a marginally increased offer that can be sold to their members in return for accepting a multi-year no-strike deal to replace the “Building Momentum” deal that expired December 2023.

Workers and young people in Ireland seeking a unified struggle in their own interests must adopt a revolutionary internationalist perspective to wage a struggle against British imperialism, the Irish bourgeoisie and the major corporations and for a socialist Ireland. Rank-and-file committees must be built, independently of the corrupt union apparatus and to actively combat all sectarian divisions. To begin this industrial and political struggle workers must contact the Socialist Equality Group today.



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