

Right-wing led fuel protests bring Ireland to a halt

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The recent fuel protests in Ireland, involving farmers, hauliers and small business owners, underscore mounting social tensions driven by the deepening global crisis. Though rooted in legitimate grievances over soaring costs, the absence of an independent working-class movement allowed right-wing and even far-right forces to dominate.

In March, just weeks after the outbreak of the US-Iran war, the Fine Gael/Fianna Fáil coalition government led by Taoiseach Micheál Martin announced a temporary package of €250 million which reduced petrol by €0.10 per litre and diesel by €0.20. This was obliterated by further price increases as the Middle East crisis intensified. By early April, petrol cost around €1.91 a litre and diesel €2.14, compared with €1.70 and €1.69 as recently as January.

In response, for four days, ports, motorways, central Dublin and the country's only oil refinery were blockaded by hundreds of vehicles driven by farmers, agricultural contractors, hauliers, builders, bus operators and taxi drivers. At one point, a majority of petrol stations were reported as running dry.

The refusal of Ireland's trade unions to mobilise workers against the coalition government has enabled right-wing influencers and politicians to fill the void. Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) general secretary Owen Reidy issued a statement on March 24, saying the government's paltry relief package was "welcome" and calling for measures such as "remote working to save on petrol costs" as "a cost-free response for employers and the Exchequer"! He warned that failure to act would make heightened wage demands "a real risk".

The protests stemmed from a meeting in the Midland Hotel, Portlaoise, March 29, attended by around 400 people. Farmer and contractor James Geoghegan, who emerged as one of the protest leaders, has repeatedly appeared on the social media channels of far-right, anti-migrant, anti-vaxxer "citizen journalist" Philip Dwyer.

Geoghegan was involved in large protests earlier this year in Athlone against the EU-Mercosur trade deal which threatens to undermine much of the beef farming industry in

Ireland, with cheaper meat imports to the trade bloc.

Geoghegan reported a committee was formed with representatives from agricultural contracting, farming, plant and bus hire, and the haulage sector. There were "100 - 200 men driving trucks," who were "ready to park up their trucks in the middle of the roads, wherever they are told to go and at whatever time they are told to do it..."

The meeting was addressed by the Independent Ireland party's founder and member of parliament, Michael Collins, who highlighted the share of fuel revenue taken by the government in taxation. Taxation makes up more than half the price of both diesel and petrol in Ireland.

Independent Ireland is a right-wing, anti-migrant, anti-abortion party committed to law and order and business deregulation. Much of their pitch is to small business owners, precisely those layers squeezed by the fuel crisis.

Days later, an Irish Haulage Farming Construction Contractors Amalgamation was formed. The new grouping sent a letter to the government demanding a fuel price cap, the suspension of carbon tax on fuel and financial support for households and business.

Protests began to be organised on social media around Facebook pages such as "The People of Ireland Against Fuel Price Protest", a long-standing page run by tow truck operator and anti-migrant campaigner Sonny Boyd.

Other prominent figures include Christopher Duffy, an agricultural contractor, whose Facebook page includes vile comments about Muslims and that he would not care if environmental campaigner Greta Thunberg was "raped or beaten". Numerous far-right social media commentators, in Ireland and internationally, offered support to the protests.

On April 7, rolling roadblocks were reported on major motorways, including the M6 from Galway, M8, M7 and M1, as protestors made their way to Dublin and to protests in dozens of rural towns and villages. Over 150 trucks, tractors and heavy goods vehicles blockaded Dublin's O'Connell Street where a rally of hundreds of people was held. Luas tram and bus services were disrupted across the city. Large assemblies of vehicles and protestors were also

reported in Midleton, Tullamore, Cashel, Castlebar and Rosslare.

A blockade was set up at the Whitegate oil refinery in Cork, which supplies about 40 percent of Ireland's petrol. The refinery entrance was blocked by trucks and tractors and around 60 people.

Another blockade, maintained by up to 100 demonstrators, was set up outside a fuel depot in Galway. For four days, no fuel left the depot, although all other traffic was allowed to pass. Rosslare harbour and Europort were also closed by protestors.

The blockades stopped fuel deliveries to Ireland's 1,200 or so petrol stations, with as many as 700 running out of fuel over the next few days. By April 10, health services were running out of fuel, appointments were cancelled, medicine deliveries impacted, and water treatment and animal feed supplies were delayed. Bus services to Dublin Airport were impacted by rolling roadblocks, leading to passengers walking along the motorway hard shoulder to the airport.

A panicked coalition government announced further limited palliative measures, worth €500 million, while moving to clear the protests. Measures announced included a 10-cent reduction in petrol and diesel tax, a delay in implementing carbon tax increases and support schemes for farmers and fisheries. Prices at petrol stations began to fall slightly over the following days.

Irish state finances—heavily dependent on tech company headquarters—are unusually healthy, with a budget surplus of €12.4 billion (3.7 percent of gross national income) recorded in 2025, so the sums dispensed were the least required to quell the protests.

Despite crushing housing costs, an overstretched health service and countless indicators of social stress impacting the population, the coalition—which coined €33 billion in corporate tax receipts last year—chose to divert much of its surplus into sovereign wealth and savings funds.

Dozens of gardai (police) and army tow trucks were deployed to clear the protests at Whitegate refinery and the Galway fuel depot. At Whitegate, some scuffles ensued as public order police armed with pepper spray pushed protestors back. One 14-year-old was pepper sprayed. Over the course of the protests, a handful of people were arrested for driving offences.

Taoiseach (Irish Prime Minister) Micheál Martin's handling of the protests saw the opposition Sinn Féin—who had expressed sympathy with those impacted by soaring fuel costs—table a motion of no confidence in the coalition. While the government won the vote, by 92 to 78 votes, an independent Minister of State, Michael Healy-Rae, announced his unexpected resignation. Healy-Rae was one of a group of right-wing independent members of parliament

who have kept the coalition in power.

Sections of the media raged at what they deemed an unacceptable climb down. Former *Irish Times* editor Stephen Collins commented, “We need to be ready” against “opponents who don't feel bound by accepted conventions.” He complained that “the protests came close to shutting down the economy, disrupting the running of the health service and causing public disorder on a wide scale [but] did not appear to generate widespread indignation.” Collins called for “a comprehensive plan to deal with future discords.”

Millions of workers are being hit by fuel price increases and a surge in the cost of living. However, the fact that protests over fuel cost increases were politically dominated by the far-right is a dangerous situation. One brought about by the role of the trade union bureaucracy in suppressing independent class action by the working class.

Days after the protests were ended, Owen Reidy, the general secretary of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions—which represents 600,000 workers—met with Taoiseach Martin and Irish business in the Labour Employer Economic Forum.

In line with the unions' practice over decades of no-strike agreements and social partnership, Reidy merely warned the government, in advance of the meeting, that “what we want to see is a process where government engages with us over the coming weeks on fundamental issues...” Failing that, and indicating that he would do everything he could to prevent it, “strike action is probably inevitable,” he warned. All parties agreed to meet again in a few weeks.

There is no prospect of the ICTU waging a struggle in defence of workers' living standards. Workers in Ireland are posed with building independent rank-and-file organisations to unify their struggles across sectors and national borders. Above all, a new socialist political leadership, an Irish section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, is needed.



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