Huge public sector strike votes in Ireland

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Over the last few weeks, around 200,000 public sector workers in Ireland have registered a series of near unanimous votes supporting industrial action in pursuit of improvements in their pay and conditions. More are anticipated in the weeks ahead, reflecting sharply escalating class tensions on a global scale.

The votes were triggered by failure of the government and trade unions to find a working framework for a new, multi-year pay deal, to replace the 30 month Public Service Agreement, which expired in June and gave 9.6 percent pay rises over its duration, barely above inflation.

At the end of the last month, SIPTU members in the public sector, including health, local government and workers in state agencies, voted by 97 percent for strike action. SIPTU has 75,000 public service members. Unite the Union reported that its membership across the public sector voted, “overwhelmingly” for industrial action.

September 1, the Fórsa union, with over 100,000 public sector members, announced that 96 percent of nearly 65,000 who voted supported industrial action. General Secretary Kevin Callinan said the result was the largest every trade union ballot for strike action in Irish history and predicted a “very long dispute.”

A few days later, 99 percent of members of the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation (INMO) who participated supported industrial action. INMO general secretary, Phil Ní Sheaghdha, said “Members on the ground, who are working in extremely challenging conditions due to overcrowding and understaffing, have made it clear that they are dissatisfied with the lack of urgency surrounding the cost-of-living pressures they are facing.”

Members of the Association of Secondary Teachers Ireland (ASTI) union are also balloting. The union represents 21,000 teachers in schools and colleges.

The votes for strike action reflect the intolerable cost of living and deep frustrations at social inequality.

A 2025 Eurostat report noted that, while average wages in Ireland are relatively high, the country also had the second highest overall cost of living in Europe, only exceeded by Denmark. Costs are 38 percent above the European average. Tobacco and alcohol are 205 percent above the average, food is 21 percent higher.

Housing costs are among the highest, if not the highest in Europe. A recent report from Ireland’s Economic & Social Research Institute noted housing prices are 17 percent above what they would expect, given incomes, interest rates and population demographics. House prices have risen faster than incomes, mortgage rates have increased and there is an overall shortage of housing. This translates into a median house price of €475,000 in Dublin against a median annual wage of about €46,000 and annual private rental prices of €24,000.

The medians obscure tremendous differences. There are 11 billionaires listed as based in Ireland with a combined wealth of €46.3 billion while another recent ESRI report listed 200,000 children in households with incomes below the poverty line—defined as 60 percent of median household income.

Earlier this year, in the face of spiralling fuel prices triggered by the Trump administration’s attack on Iran, and the suppression of the class struggle by the trade unions, far right figures were able to come to head of a number of protests against escalating fuel prices which threatened to shut down oil supplies to much of the country.

Meanwhile, the Irish government is awash with tax receipts from the many transnationals, mostly US and European, including most of the world’s largest tech corporations.

In 2025 the government’s total tax income was €105 billion, of which corporation tax contributed nearly one third, €32.9 billion. Of this, as much as 87 percent of the government’s tax take was from foreign owned companies, and 11 of the largest contributed 56 percent. A budget surplus of €12.4 billion was recorded in 2025 with another €9.2 billion surplus anticipated this year.

This is highly unstable, however. In June, the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council (IFAC) warned that the current situation had echoes of 2006, just prior to the world economic crisis. IFAC CEO Seamus Coffey told an Oireachtas (parliament) committee that in 2006 the economy was “hugely dependent” on the construction sector which in turn relied on credit. When the “credit tap turned very, very quickly... it was 200,000 jobs lost in construction and... 100,000 further jobs across the entire economy.” Coffey continued, “We can see, in retrospect... the reliance on one sector. In 2026, there are clear echoes with the reliance on [corporation tax] revenue.”

The government, therefore, has no intentions of conceding the sort of public sector settlement necessary to satisfy the urgent needs of the working class.

At the outset of negotiations with PCS officials, Fianna Fail government minister Jack Chambers warned, “There continues to be profound uncertainty in the global environment, particularly due to the conflict in the Middle East. Because of this, and despite the daily calls from the Opposition to throw more money at every issue, it is more important than ever that budgetary policy remains balanced and sustainable over the medium term.”

The coordinated ballots are part of efforts by the Irish trade union apparatus to retain control of the situation and prevent major strikes in return for minimal pay increases that will rapidly be eaten up by inflation. By giving a temporary display of militancy, threatening ineffectual and partial strikes and a certain amount of militant rhetoric, the intention is to strengthen the union bureaucracy’s bargaining position with the government, all the better to impose an inadequate settlement on the working class.

Despite the enormous majorities, only a single strike day has been declared. The Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) public sector committee (PSC), which embraces 19 unions with members in the public sector, announced a strike on October 14, with workplace picketing. All the unions that have held ballots by then will be involved. Kevin Callinan, who is also chair of the PSC said that “a further strike, if necessary, is also planned.”

This is the context of a loose “Affordable Ireland” campaign put together by the pseudo-left People Before Profit (PBP), in alliance with Sinn Fein, the Labour Party, the Irish Social Democrats, disability rights groups, student groups, the trade unions, the ICTU. Set up earlier this year, the campaign’s stated goal is to pressure the government into spending some more tax money to reduce the cost of living. A demonstration has been called September 19, weeks before the budget.

None of the parties involved have the slightest intention of fighting for any serious encroachment into the wealth of the transnationals, Irish based corporations or the oligarchy running them. Rather, the campaign’s purpose is to promote the credentials of an alternative “left” government around Sinn Fein, to defend Ireland as an investment platform in conditions of global crisis when the Fianna Fail/ Fine Gael coalition runs out of road, while channelling class tensions towards protests which the government can ignore.

Workers in Ireland seeking a way to take the struggle to defend their living standards out of the control of the pro-corporate trade union bureaucracy should contact the International Workers Alliance of Rank and File Committees to plan and coordinate such an offensive.

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