

You need another PESP like a hole in the head

Alan MacSimoin

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The Irish Congress of Trade Unions is to hold a special delegate conference on September 30th. It will decide whether or not to enter into talks on a further agreement to replace the Programme for Economic and Social Development. Having made up their minds which way they want the vote to go, the letter adds that the conference “will also consider the issues to be covered in negotiations on future Programmes”.

The campaign by the ICTU leadership for a new Programme has begun. We will be told, again; that workers, the bosses and the government will be able to sit down as equals and make the best decisions to help the ‘national interest’. It’s a very noble sounding idea until you consider that there is no ‘national interest’. Workers and bosses have opposing interests. If they didn’t we wouldn’t need unions!

‘NATIONAL INTEREST’

The ‘national interest’ is used to make us think we have more in common with our bosses than we do with workers in other countries. What do we have in common with crooks like Larry Goodman, Michael Smurfit or Ben Dunne? What have the workers in Nolan Transport in New Ross got in common with their rich, mean and union-bashing employer? Whose was the ‘national interest’ when the government reneged on the PESP pay terms in the public sector in February 1992?

Labour being in government won’t make it any better. Within a few weeks of getting their backsides onto cabinet seats they had decided to tax disability benefit, cut the students’ summer dole, not repeal the “dirty dozen” welfare cuts, broken their promise to provide the necessary cash for Aer Lingus. Indeed redundancies and pay cuts are being talked about. The 3% local bargaining clause of the PESP will not be paid in the public service. Probably the only promise they kept was to create some more jobs. The problem is that most of the jobs went to Ministers’ families.

Once again we will be told, by every class of ‘informed commentator’, that PESP-type programmes give the best wage increases in Europe and that wage restraint will be returned in extra jobs. The fact is that — after the PNR and with the PESP almost completed — Ireland has its highest ever dole queues. The fact is that the percentage of total tax paid by PAYE workers has jumped to almost double what it was in the allegedly bad old days before such agreements.

HAS ANYONE SEEN MY PAY RISE?

The fact is that the ratio of wage increases to inflation in those same ‘bad old days’ has fallen from 2:5 down to just over half that amount today. And let us not forget that the anti-union Industrial Relations Act was introduced in 1990, without a whimper of protest by the ICTU leaders, as a PNR commitment (see PESP page 84).

Three years ago a handful of union activists came together to oppose such collaboration with bosses and government. The network they formed, Trade Unionists and Unemployed Against the Programme*, won the sponsorship of over 300 shop stewards, produced tens of thousands of leaflets and newsletters arguing for a ‘no’ vote. Public meetings were held in most larger towns. Despite most unions having pro-PESP policy and despite the fact that the anti-PESP forces ran on a shoestring budget, almost one third of all trade unionists who voted rejected the deal.

TUUAP didn't close up shop and go away after the vote. It is getting ready to launch a campaign against whatever new proposals emerge. It has the sensible position of not being fooled into believing that workers ever stand to gain from making concessions to either government or to millionaire employers.

This time around the socialist argument against class collaboration should be made as loudly as the specific arguments on wages, jobs and social welfare. We have to rebuild a sense of working class political independence. Beyond the immediate campaign against a PESP mark 2, a rank & file movement strong enough and confident enough to remain independent of the union leaders and willing to openly defy the anti-union laws is needed. It won't be built overnight but there is no time like the present for getting people thinking on these lines. Anarchists will be there arguing for libertarian structures, for participatory democracy and for the anarchist alternative to the present system.

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