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Were Irish union leaders behind the public sector pay cut?

Report from the national meeting of public sector
workers on Saturday

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February 18, 2009

Retrieved on 12th August 2021 from www.anarkismo.net
First published on indymedia.ie, this is an 'internationalised
version' in which I have spelt out the acronyms (which would be
well know in Ireland) and linked to the various union websites.

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saying we all had to share the wealth that was generated. Now that the boom has turned to bust they suddenly do want to share their losses. We have to say no to talks, even talks disguised under the label of a 'social solidarity pact'. As workers and as trade unionists should turn up in huge numbers on the demonstration this Saturday but our demand should be for strike action and not in support of the ICTU demand for talks.

role some of the ICTU leadership appeared to have played in introducing the pensions levy along with the reports of the deliberate attempts by some union leaders to demoralise members thinking about strike action warn us that we cannot put our trust in the union leadership to lead the sort of struggle that is necessary to win. There were many sections and even some branches that were not represented at the meeting, on the anecdotal level I've talked to public sector workers who report the union in their workplace is either dead or distrusted. The challenge for these workers is to overcome these demoralising conditions and link into this emerging network of struggle, to link up with those within their union who do want to fight, bypassing where necessary the local officials and recalling conservative union reps. As reports at the meeting indicated this has already started happening in some branches, it needs to spread fast, far and wide.

Who should pay for the crisis?

As workers we have to defend our jobs, pay and conditions whether that is in the public or private sector. And as workers we have to defend social services like health and education as well as social welfare. Let those who pay for the bust be the same gang of bankers and property speculators that made so much during the boom whether that be by confiscation of the wealth of anyone named at the tribunals in connection with corruption or with the recent dodgy dealings in the bank. The richest 1% of people in Ireland are worth over 80 billion, that 1% creamed it in during the boom, let's make them pay for the bust.

ICTU are trying to push us into accepting negotiations, negotiations where we will clearly come out of with cuts in our wages and conditions. Even apart from not trusting the leadership we have to reject this approach. After all when the boom was in full swing there was not a line of politicians, property developers and bankers

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a point. In the context the one day strikes could only be seen as part of the process, the government was not going to give in the next day.

Saturday's demonstration

Towards the end of the meeting discussion came up about the 'Social Solidarity Pact' march called by ICTU for next Saturday. Des Derwin said this should not have been the demand of the march and many speakers emphasised the need to be opposed to this slogan and instead to use the march to push for strike action. Paul Shields, the SIPTU chair in TCD said they felt that rather than march with SIPTU they should organise a block on the march opposed to this demand and for strike action. Overall there was agreement that while it was important that people came out and marched this should be under the demand of ballots for strike action and not the official march slogan.

The last few minutes were spent in a discussion of setting up an ongoing structure to co-ordinate activity into the future. One criticism of the meeting I'd make was that too little time was left for this discussion and not much preparation had been made for it. On the other hand the meeting itself was called at very short notice and there was much else that also needed to be talked about. What was agreed at the end was that a number of people would volunteer from each of the unions in the room and that they would work out these details to be ratified at a follow up meeting. In the meantime it was essential to ensure that momentum towards industrial action was continued to be built in union branches and sections.

Overall the meeting demonstrated a growing groundswell of organisation from the rank and file of the public sector unions across the country as well as that some of the union executives like that of the CPSU recognise the need for rapid and militant action. The

ings in UCD, Trinity College Dublin (TCD) and Dublin City University (DCU) had voted by as many as 197 to 3 for strike action and the withdrawal of unions reps from the local partnership process. An IMPACT member in the health service related how a motion for strike action had been pushed through despite the opposition of managers present and that alongside this several changes had been made on the branch committee. Terry Kelleher of the CPSU executive said they had moved quickly to a ballot for action in what were difficult conditions and argued that circumstances had changed to the point where rank and file initiatives that had failed in the past should now be re-launched.

The North Dublin branch of the INTO had according to Niall Smyth held a 500m strong emergency meeting which had forced the Executive committee to ballot the membership. Denis Keane also of the CPSU executive reported that he had now addressed 14 meetings of members around Dublin as they worked towards the ballot and that while there was a real sense of fear about what was to come there was also the realisation that they needed to draw a line in the sand, that there really was no option other than the strike and that members would vote for action on that basis.

There was discussion of how best to support the CPSU strike that would probably take place on the 26th. At the start of the meeting Paddy Healy who was in the chair had suggested this could be turned into an all out strike. But others felt that, given the reality of the mid-term break for the teachers unions, it probably wasn't realistic to talk of being able to turn this date into an all out strike and it would be a tactical error to suggest we could do this. Nevertheless everyone present felt the CPSU were right to go ahead and that we should support them in every way possible while preparing for further strike action that could be co-ordinated between the unions. Gregor Kerr of INTO emphasised that as part of the process we would need to explain industrial action to members who thanks to social partnership had no experience of strikes. It was important to emphasise that the point was to strike to win and not just make

Did the idea of the so called 'Pensions Levy' come from some of the very Irish Congress of Trade Unions leadership who are supposed to negotiate on behalf of workers. This is one revelation that emerged on Saturday morning at a meeting of over 100 public sector trade unionists and two delegates from the Waterford Glass occupation. We were meeting in the Davenport hotel, Dublin to discuss a collective response to government attacks on workers and in particular the public sector pay cut. Most of those present were on branch committees or even national executives with a couple of branches delegating representatives to the meeting. The gathering could in that context be said to reflect the views of a large number of branches across the unions that organise public sector workers.

The revelation that the source of the 'pensions levy' may have come from within the ICTU delegation was made by Civil Public & Services Union (CPSU) executive member Terry Kelleher, reporting on what their executive had been told by the CPSU General Secretary who was at the talks. It's claimed that when the proposed 10% pay cut was put on the table part of the ICTU delegation proposed the 'pensions levy' as being more sellable. It was only as the specific figures became clear that Jack O'Connor of the Services, Industrial, Professional and Technical Union (SIPTU) and others pulled the rug on the deal. After Saturday's meeting I was told that a similar account of the ICTU origins of the pensions levy was circulating at the funeral of the International Brigader Bob Doyle from another source connected with those in the talks.

No trust in ICTU

This story added to a general atmosphere at the meeting of no trust whatsoever in the ICTU leadership. Pat Cahill, a retired president of the Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland (ASTI) was to say that we needed to recognise that many of the union General Secretaries were part of the 'Golden Circle' of politicians and busi-

ness interests. One of the few areas of disagreement was an initial call for ICTU to pull out of talks until after the scrapping of the pensions levy, it soon became clear that few in the room would trust ICTU even in such circumstances. Helen Mahony of the Teachers Union of Ireland (TUI) said that ICTU had betrayed all workers and that they were an overpaid set of full time officials with no links to the membership.

This hostility to the top level of union leaders was reflected in many of the reports of the union meetings that have taken place over the last couple of weeks. Niall Smyth, branch secretary of Dublin City North branch of the Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO) said the recent INTO conference in Portlaoise had been like a funeral procession with no direction at all coming from the leadership beyond the idea that the pay cut was inevitable. Melissa Halpin of IMPACT reported that her branch AGM was tightly controlled by the top table and that she felt that ran the meeting on so that by the time discussion on the pay cut came around people would be worn out. When faced with criticism the Information officer had responded that people should calm down and let them do their job. Joe Duffy of the INTO pointed to the failure of the union leadership to answer the sustained public relations offensive on public sector workers that has been going on for months.

Martin O'Grady of the TUI was one of those present that reported that he had been sent as a delegate to the meeting from this branch (Institute of Technology, Tralee) and warned of the danger of ICTU subverting the growing mood for industrial action. His branch had delegated him because it felt that the official system could not be relied to work. Eva a branch Equal Opportunities officer from IMPACT warned that senior officials were trying to frighten members by telling them they would have to be on strike for months and would have to pay the levy in the end anyway.

Building outside the public sector

Several speakers emphasised the need to build for action on a base that was broader than the public sector pay cuts. Des Derwin, president of the Dublin Council of Trade Unions said that Jack O'Connor was right when he said the movement must also be about jobs and the threatened cuts. Eddie Conlon of the TUI pointed out the poll in that morning's Irish times that showed that despite the months of one sided attacks on the public sector workers more people opposed the pay cuts than supported it. Ronald from SIPTU, University College Dublin (UCD), pointed out that in the previous week two government ministers had talked of the intention to cut the minimum wage and said the main reason the public sector workers were being targeted first was that because that was where the stronger unions were so the government knew that when they had defeated them everyone would have to accept defeat.

UNITE member Tommy Hogan from the Waterford Glass occupation addressed the meeting and reported details of the possible settlement to the meeting and said there was a need to link the issue with the need for pension protection for private sector workers. He said they knew that public services were nothing without the public sector workers who kept them going. He said the general situation was 'going over a cliff' and the union leadership were only interested in talks and not in providing leadership. When he had finished speaking the meeting gave the Glass workers a standing ovation in recognition that once more the glass workers had been 'blazing the trail' for all workers in Ireland.

Spreading resistance

Many of the contributions made focused on the spreading wave of resistance emerging from the public sector unions. Kieran Allen of the SIPTU's Education branch in Dublin related how mass meet-