

Campaign must fight on for complete abolition of service charges

Disconnection Threats Defeated in South Dublin

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With the re-introduction of service charges in the three new Dublin Councils a year ago, the anti-service charge campaign spread to Dublin. Throughout the summer public meetings at which people pledged their opposition to these charges were held in a large number of areas, culminating in a conference in late September attended by approximately 130 people representing local campaigns and residents' associations.

This Conference established the Federation of Dublin Anti-Water Charge Campaigns (FDAWCC). A co-ordinating committee was elected and it was agreed that all-Dublin activists' meetings would be held monthly and would remain the supreme decision-making body of the campaign. Over the ensuing months well-attended public meetings were held in practically every area of the counties.

Registers of non-payers were collected, local councillors lobbied and picketed and a very successful series of public protests were held outside council meetings when the 1995 estimates were being discussed. A successful Trade Union Forum was held to discuss how trade unionists – and especially council workers – could get involved. This phase of the campaign culminated in a successful protest rally in the city centre in late November.

By December 1st – the date on which non-payers' accounts fell overdue – non-payment rates were holding firm despite the councils' mix of bribery ("free" draws for those who paid) and intimidation (threats of disconnection). Official figures given by the councils showed that the non-payment rates of November 1st remained virtually unchanged (South Dublin – 65%; Fingal – 67%; Dún Laoghaire/Rathdown – 41%).

Council Threats

On Sunday November 26th South Dublin County Council's campaign of intimidation began in earnest. Selected residents received letters threatening disconnection of water supply if the charges were not paid within seven days. These letters were designed to isolate and intimidate people but in the vast majority of cases had quite the opposite effect.

The campaign responded with the immediate distribution of 60,000 leaflets advertising a 24-hour emergency 'hotline' for those who required advice or assistance. Emergency public meetings were held in many areas and lists of volunteers taken who would help to monitor their areas and ensure that disconnections were resisted.

Assurances were received from council manual workers in SIPTU and AGEMOU that they would not become involved in doing the council's dirty work. Unfortunately, the water inspectors – most of whom are members of IMPACT – were unable to get similar backing from their union leadership.

Disconnections defeated

At 4 am on Wednesday December 6th the first attempts to disconnect were made. Water inspectors who arrived in estates in Clondalkin, Lucan and Tallaght found, however, that campaign activists were well-organised and that mobile patrols were in place to prevent disconnections. Over the following two weeks several unsuccessful attempts were made to effect disconnections. Time and again when inspectors arrived at non-payers' homes they discovered that stopcocks had been blocked up and that disconnection was not possible.

And indeed on more than one occasion — with residents of the Riversdale estate in Clondalkin deserving special mention — council vans were run out of areas where cut-offs were attempted. All told, the number of successful disconnections was tiny — less than 20 according to the council themselves — and in all of these campaigners were able to reconnect supply within hours.

The prevention of disconnections was a huge success for the campaign and a major bodyblow for the council. The tremendous fight against such tactics over many years in areas such as Waterford, Cork, Limerick, Galway, Leixlip, Ashbourne and indeed many others proved an inspiration for Dublin residents.

There is no doubt that it is as a result of the years of campaigning by committed activists in these areas that the new government was forced to make some changes in the area of service charges. Neither is there any doubt that Dublin councillors and council officials now know that the campaign must be taken seriously.

Local Action Groups

While all those involved in the campaign deserve congratulation, the events of December also highlighted an organisational weakness. The number of people directly involved in this activity was relatively small and this put huge demands on those activists. In order to counteract this for the next phase of the campaign, immediate steps must be taken to ensure that in every area where there are a number of activists, they are encouraged to form themselves into local action groups taking responsibility for the maintenance and development of the campaign in their areas.

As we look to the next round in the battle, the necessity for total decentralisation and for cohesive action groups in all areas is of the utmost importance. The campaign must aim to really involve its activists — not just as leafletters or as people who can be depended upon to show up for a picket — but as the people on whom the success of the campaign depends.

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1995

Retrieved on 24th November 2021 from struggle.ws
Published in *Workers Solidarity* No. 44 – Spring 1995.

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