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When the unemployed elected their own TD

Joe King

1991

A SURVEY carried out by the Connolly Unemployed Centre at three labour exchanges in Dublin's South Inner City during the recent local elections showed that 90% of respondents would vote for an unemployed party if there was one running. Is this a way forward in the fight for decent jobs for all who want them? It is worth taking a look at what happened in 1957 when an unemployed candidate made it into the Dáil.

Ireland saw a massive rise in unemployment in the 1950s, ironically at a time when the rest of the 'western world' was booming. Emigration was to be the safety valve. However not all those out of work were prepared to uproot themselves and take the boat. Some stayed to fight.

Unemployment meant poverty. A couple with two children on Unemployment Assistance were entitled to just £1.90 a week. This bought very little, e.g. a pound of butter cost 21p. People often lived on little more than bread, margarine and tea.

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The Unemployed Protest Committee was launched on January 12th 1957 when a chair was borrowed from a local shop and a public meeting held outside Dublin's Werburgh Street labour exchange. A committee of about 16 men (no women were involved nor does it appear that any serious attempt was made to involve them) began to meet. Among their number were Sam Nolan (today an official of the builders' union UCATT and a member of the Labour Party), Johnny Mooney, Jack Murphy and William McGuinness.

Almost immediately McGuinness pulled out saying that the committee was dominated by the Communist Party (then named the Irish Workers League) and set up a rival Catholic Unemployed Association. With the seemingly obligatory split out of the way the UPC got down to business.

Use of a room was provided by the Dublin Trades Council and a march was arranged for January 16th. About one hundred men and a solitary woman marched through the city under a banner inscribed with "support us in our demand for work". It was a tame beginning. Even the Catholic grouping was looking for a 50% increase in social welfare payments.

Agitation was stepped up and more joined the ranks of the UPC. Up to this point most had looked to the Labour TDs to fight on behalf of the unemployed. Sam Nolan summed it up at a UPC meeting at the end of January, "surely it was the responsibility of the Labour leaders and deputies to work out some organised plan. After all they were supposed to represent the working class".

Most members quickly saw that the Labour Party would contribute little more than empty platitudes. When the government fell in February after Séan McBride's Clann na Poblachta withdrew their support Jack Murphy proposed that the UPC run a candidate in the coming general election. This was seen as a way of putting the need for jobs onto the political agenda.

Two names were put forward, Nolan and Murphy. Both were unemployed building workers. Nolan was a leading Com-

munist. The Communists were divided on running him. Some, including Nolan himself, were unwilling to allow the UPC to be seen as a front for their party.

Murphy was a left republican who had been interned in the 1940s and had been a militant shop steward. He was selected to contest the election in Dublin South Central. The £100 deposit was raised from unlikely sources. £25 each came from Toddy O’Sullivan, manager of the Gresham Hotel; Fr. Counihane, a Jesuit priest; a Fianna Fáil senator called Mooney and Mr Digby, the owner of Pye Radio.

After a vigorous campaign Murphy gathered 3,036 votes and was elected. His seat was gained at the expense of the Labour Party who had run James Connolly’s son Roddy. Murphy’s success was encouraging to unemployed activists and new organisations were set up in Waterford and Cork.

If the unemployed thought that having one of their own in the Dáil would force the government to take their concerns more seriously they were in for a shock. Murphy could not even get an answer to a question about how much unemployment relief money would be spent in Dublin.

There was no problem, however, in providing an answer to Fine Gael’s Belton when he asked about the “hardship imposed on cricket clubs because of the cost of cricket balls”.

The new Fianna Fáil government’s budget provided for the ending of food subsidies. This was going to hit the unemployed and low paid workers very hard. The response of the trade union leaders was pathetic. The Provisional United Trade Union Organisation (forerunner to the ICTU) had a lot in common with today’s leaders – an overwhelming concern for industrial peace and the bosses’ profits.

It pointed out “that the removal of food subsidies was neither necessary nor wise. While creating terrible hardships for the unemployed it also created a situation where claims for higher wages would be made with the threat of widespread instability or industrial strife”.

Jack Murphy and two other UPC members, Tommy Kavanagh and Jimmy Byrne, went on hunger strike. This was not a UPC stunt, in fact they learned of the hunger strike through the newspapers. Murphy, as 'the elected representative of the unemployed', didn't see why he should have to consult with the committee.

The hunger strike lasted for four days. Each evening several thousand turned up to protest meetings at the corner of Abbey Street and O'Connell Street. Over 1,000 marched to Leinster House seeking a meeting with the Minister for Industry and Commerce, Séan Lemass — who sneaked out the back gate.

Resolutions began to come from trades councils and union branches calling for a one day strike. There was now a possibility of building the sort of campaign that could force the government to back down.

This possibility quickly evaporated when Murphy fell sick and with Byrne and Kavanagh called off the hunger strike on day four. To save face the UPC arranged for trade union leaders to appeal for its end in order to save lives. It was wrong to rush into a hunger strike, and the way it was called off caused much confusion and demoralisation among the unemployed.

All that followed was a few delegations to plead with Fianna Fáil TDs and a meeting between Murphy and Catholic Archbishop McQuaid. McQuaid made it clear he would not interfere in political decisions (which had not stopped him dictating to the previous government over the Mother and Child Scheme). He further warned Murphy of the danger of associating with Communists.

The last big demonstration was a 2,000 strong march from Séan McDermott Street to the Dáil. Jack Murphy opposed the demonstration saying it conflicted with his Dáil work. In August he broke with the UPC and the next year he resigned his Dáil seat.

The unemployed movement was dead. The biggest mistake they made was getting involved in parliamentary politics. Far

from building active support for the UPC it made its supporters passive. Why bother marching, going to meetings and seeking trade union action if you have a TD to 'represent' you? The election of Murphy was seen by most as an end in itself.

The key to winning on issues like extra jobs, higher payments and lower food prices is a mass, active movement. A movement that can and will fight alongside those in work. This is incompatible with electing figureheads to speak for us, to argue for us, to make decisions for us.

Real democracy is necessary. This means those affected by decisions having the power to make them. It does not mean handing that power over to a few individuals, that only makes people passive. No boss or government feels under pressure to make concessions to the passive.