

Perks Before People, DL Endorse Water Cut-Offs

Workers Solidarity Movement

1995

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The formation of the “Rainbow Coalition” in December led to a number of promises of change in the double taxation service charges which have been vigorously opposed by residents’ and community groups throughout the state since their inception.

Legislation was promised to “delimit” the power of County Councils to disconnect water supply for non-payment of charges. Within hours of the government’s formation, newly-appointed Minister of State Pat Rabbitte of Democratic Left was on RTE television pledging that “there will be no more disconnections” (or words to that effect). Rabbitte’s statement came at a particularly emotive time. The previous three weeks had seen a massive campaign where the power of local residents’ groups and the Federation of Dublin Anti-Water Charge Campaigns had combined to defeat attempts by South Dublin County Council to disconnect non-payers’ water supply.

Empty promise

As we go to press however (early April) – over three months into the government’s life – the government has just announced its proposed legislation and it is clear that the pledges in the Programme for Government represented no more than the usual empty political promises. The “delimiting” of the Councils’ power to disconnect water simply means that Council officials will have to get a court order to allow them to do so. For Democratic Left this involves a total capitulation.

Having made the abolition of service charges one of their main demands on entering the negotiations to form a government and having met with stiff resistance to this from both Labour and Fine Gael, they opted for the social democrats’ usual response in sticky situations – fudge it, come up with a formulation of words likely to keep everyone happy for the time being. Thus the demand for complete abolition of the charges was quietly shelved, attention was focussed on disconnections and the word “delimit” made its appearance. To DL it meant that disconnections were finished. However to Labour and Fine Gael (and according to the dictionary) the meaning was somewhat different (DELIMIT: to fix or mark the limit of – Chambers’s 20th Century Dictionary).

It didn’t take long for the County Managers to spot the loophole. With Councils throughout the State experiencing a dramatic fall-off in revenue as PAYE taxpayers took Pat Rabbitte at his word and joined the non-payment campaign (e.g. Meath County Council’s income from charges fell from £122,000 in January 1994 to £79,000 in January 1995) Council officials launched an intensive lobby on government ministers to maintain the right to disconnect.

Far from sweet

As reports emerged that the issue of water charges and disconnections had led to several rows among cabinet ministers and crisis meetings between the leaders of the three government parties, it began to appear that the fudge was far from sweet. And when the legislation was finally announced – just days before DL’s Annual Delegate Conference – the capitulation was complete. A party which had started out from a position of complete opposition to service charges had endorsed the right of Councils to disconnect water supply to non-payers – provided they got a court order first!

The argument put forward — even by some DL activists who had been involved in the fight against service charges is that they are ‘only a small party’, that the issue would not even be on the agenda but for them and — of course — that it is ‘a step in the right direction’. They should try telling that to the 900 people who had their supply cut-off last year or to the hundreds now likely to face court summonses. And while the DL Conference did pass an amended motion criticising the government for failing to call service charges double taxation, they overwhelmingly rejected a motion condemning the party leadership for not gaining a government commitment to abolish the charges.

The lesson for anti-service charge campaigners — and indeed for all members of the working class — should be clear. Trust no-one but yourselves, the only way to victory is through solidarity action and through a continuation and intensification of the campaign. Those who claim to use “parliamentary democracy” to achieve change will eventually compromise and fudge — usually in the cause of something called “the national interest”.

We’re not paying

County Councils in Dublin and elsewhere know that the vast majority of people are not going to pay these charges in 1995 just as they refused to pay them in 1994. They also know that the threat of disconnections or court action doesn’t worry us. When they tried their intimidatory tactics before, they were sent packing. Anti-service charge campaigners should now have but one message for those who would attempt to fudge the issue — stop trying to fool us, we know that your mercs and perks are more important to you than your principles (if you have any left).

Continue the campaign

The Federation of Dublin Anti-Water Charge Campaigns has outlined a strategy to render the new regulations on disconnections unworkable. This strategy will include

- Every court case must be contested
- No householder will be isolated and there will be a coordinated approach to all court hearings
- Legal advice and representation will be arranged
- In the event of disconnection being ordered, this will be resisted by peaceful protest
- Where water is disconnected, reconnection will be arranged
- Appeals will be made to local authority workers and their trade unions to continue to refuse to co-operate with disconnections

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