

Ireland's water charges revolt

Bernie McAdam and Dara O'Cogaidhin Sun, 09/11/2014 - 16:25

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Ireland is in the midst of a massive revolt against its government's attempts to slap water charges on the Irish people. On October 11, at least 100,000 marched in Dublin to protest against this regressive tax. On November 1, a total of some 200,000 marched in over one hundred protests throughout Ireland.

As the new water utility, Irish Water, attempts to install water meters, it has been met with resistance on several estates. The Gardai have been Irish Water's loyal protectors attacking and arresting protesters. Protests are flaring up on a regular basis. Over a million people have not returned their registration/application packs.

The coalition government of Fine Gael and the Labour Party has been rocked by this crisis. A recent opinion poll puts FG down to 22 percent and Labour reaching the pits at 7 percent. In contrast, Sinn Fein, which claims to be against the water charges, is now heading the polls with 26 percent.

In the recent by election in Dublin South West, Sinn Fein were favourites to win the seat but threw away the opportunity when their leaders, Gerry Adams and Mary Lou McDonald, despite their anti charges rhetoric, said they would be paying their water tax. The Anti Austerity Alliance (a campaign initiated by the Socialist Party) candidate had a much clearer message of refusing to pay and consequently won a stunning victory.

The scale of the rebellion has taken everyone by surprise. Yet six years of unrelenting austerity without any sustained protest action combined with a government narrative that tells us the economy is recovering was bound to lead to a snapping point.

A Right to Water

The Right2Water campaign has certainly struck a chord with the Irish people. It has been backed by five unions, MANDATE, UNITE, CWU, OPATSI AND CPSU and also supported by Sinn Fein, People before Profit (SWP backed) and Anti Austerity Alliance (SP backed). Although it has organised several demonstrations, the campaign focuses on collecting signatures for a mass petition.

Disgracefully, but all too typically, the Irish TUC and the leader of the largest trade union, Jack O'Connor of SIPTU, have played an ignominious role in the whole water charges struggle and have not backed R2W. SIPTU has effectively accepted water charges by saying only that the government 'must defer the payment' and that 'abolishing charges and reverting to the general taxation system will not mean that people pay less'. This is merely echoing the Taoiseach Enda Kenny's threat that abolition of charges would see an increase of income tax by 4 percent.

Clearly O'Connor dare not challenge his Labour Party masters. In six years of austerity in Ireland, he has not lifted a finger against the endless attacks on his members' living standards. SIPTU members must

demand the union launch a fighting campaign on water charges and use this issue to organise a militant rank and file movement within the union to remove its present yellow leadership.

Privatisation

Water provision in Ireland is not free. Until now, water supply has been paid for out of general taxation with revenues transferred to the local authorities who were responsible for service provision. Now, the government have set up Irish Water to provide water as a public utility.

This centralised utility, coming with charges and meters, is widely viewed as a short step away from privatisation. Despite politicians' claims to the contrary, even the moderate union leaders like O'Connor believe it will be privatised. The infamous Troika, IMF, ECB and EU, which has largely been dictating the speed of austerity, will no doubt be applying pressure on this front as well.

O'Connor and co, with their most 'left' face on, have called for a referendum as the best way to stop the privatisation. However, the call for a referendum is an enormous distraction from fighting the water charges in the here and now. The best way to stop water privatisation is to organise real action against water charges. Winning that battle will make the government think twice.

How to Win.

The Right2Water Campaign has decided that December 10 will be the next demonstration against the water charges. There will be a huge assembly of protesters outside the Dail. This protest will be on a weekday and provides an opportunity to build industrial action against the government. A general strike should be called for that day. That would ensure a monster demonstration and shift the locus of the struggle towards industrial action.

Such a shift is absolutely necessary, the R2W Campaign must move beyond just demos and petitions. If the will of the people is not to be ignored, a campaign of direct action and industrial action must be organised. So far, however, R2W has not spelled out what is necessary for victory. Indeed, they have not even called for non payment of the charges.

To its credit, R2W has initiated a nationwide movement but that movement itself now needs an organisational form. The aim should be a national body democratically based on local councils of action that reflect the depth and breadth of the movement. The experience of the anti bin tax campaign must not be repeated. That saw a divided movement go down to defeat because it lacked both a common strategy for direct action and any means of combatting the scab SIPTU bureaucracy that instructed members not to collect all bins.

The campaign against water charges must be driven forward by local organisations of the communities and the estates. A collective decision not to register, not to send in the application packs and not to pay the charges should be the basis of the campaign. The time for action is now.

Local groups are already actively engaged in stopping the installation of water meters. Residents have been attacked by the Gardai at many of these and other protests. A visit of Enda Kenny to Santry saw three people arrested. When hundreds of protestors then picketed Coolock Gardai station, they were brutally attacked by baton charging and pepper spraying Gardai. Once more this demonstrates the need for local groups to organise self defence as part of the direct action programme.

Industrial Action

The Irish state has been able to impose its austerity attacks because the trade union leaderships have refused to mount any resistance. Now is the time to challenge this cowardice. Now is the time to launch a fight back against austerity in all of its forms. The spirit of rebellion on the streets must be taken into the workplaces and the unions.

The December 10 protest should involve workplace meetings deciding on walk outs and supporting the march on the Dail. This should be the first step in raising the prospect of all out indefinite strikes. Socialists should be at the forefront of calling such action as the best route to victory.

It is essential that workers involved in the installation process be taken on board. All workers involved in Irish Water, like those who install the meters, distribute the mail, etc should be approached by their unions with a view to refusing to carry out any work relating to water charges. Any victimisation resulting from such action must be met with the full force of union solidarity action.

The Socialist Party were right to hammer Sinn Fein on the question of non payment of water charges. They are also right to criticise the R2W campaign and its uncritical supporters in the PbP (SWP) for a reluctance to commit to non payment. But we cannot rely only on non payment for victory. The surest and quickest way to win is to combine direct action on the estates with the necessity of building for industrial action in the workplaces, with the support of the union leaders if possible, without them if necessary.

What Next?

Turn December 10 protest into a general strike!

Councils of Action should be built in every community and workplace to organise the campaign at local level.

Refuse to register and commit to non payment!

Solidarity should be sought from workers involved in the installation process. We should demand of the unions that they boycott the Water Charges process!

Local communities should organise self defence to prevent the Gardai's attacks.

Call a national conference of all the anti water charges groups and unions to decide an action programme.

No to privatisation of the water industry.

Build rank and file movements in every union and across the unions to campaign for industrial action against the charges and every austerity measure. If the leaders won't fight then we need a new fighting leadership!

This mass movement has largely been spontaneous. Many working class protesters have fortunately not waited for the union leaders to act. Remembering the victory against water charges in Dublin in 1994-96, which was won by a community campaign of direct action, many may now be sceptical of calling for the unions to act.

But focussing solely on the community means leaving the union bureaucrats in unchallenged control of the biggest working class organisations. It means letting them off the hook, as happened in the anti-bin tax campaign. We need to reclaim our unions on the basis of new fighting policies and new fighting leaders. Only then can the Irish working class mobilise the power it has to shut down the economy to stop the austerity programme in its tracks.

The Irish working class has a rich history of struggle and of leaders like Connolly and Larkin who pulled no punches when it came to industrial action. The current rebellion must not be allowed to diffuse and retreat. We must not fail to build new organisations of struggle unafraid of using the weapons, like the solidarity strike and the union militia, so favoured by Connolly and Larkin. That is the road to the Workers' Republic, and there are no short cuts!

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