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Ireland

Water: The straw that broke the camel's back

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Why did Irish workers, seen as passively accepting years of austerity, suddenly rise up against the imposition of water charges? [1]

Quite simply it was the straw that broke the camel's back. It was the final imposition, after years of cuts, charges, job losses and migration, imposed at a time when the Irish government proclaimed an economic recovery to a working class struggling to survive. Yet a limited uptick in economic activity is based partly on the savage cuts in labour costs, partly by cheap money from the European Central Banks and partly on creative accounting by a government facing an election. In reality the programme of austerity will continue until 2054.

The overwhelming success of the austerity has been to make Ireland one of the most unequal societies in the world, as the local kleptocracy concentrate wealth in their hands.

Adding to popular anger was a level of corruption exceptional even by Irish standards. The Irish national pension reserve was raided to install water meters. Denis O'Brien, who became rich through the privatisation of the Irish telecommunications industry, won the contract to fit meters while his newspaper empire attacked water charge protestors. Hundreds of Millions were spent on consultancy fees. In the background was routine corruption that left the water service to decay over decades. In some areas water losses from leaks are over 60% and it was proposed that people be charged for water that was unfit to drink.

A slow rebellion

So what has to be explained is not why the Irish have rebelled, but why it took 6 years to bring about an explosion.

The answers are complex. Industrial struggles and rank and file organization in the trade unions declined sharply with the development of "Social Partnership" in the 1980s. The settlement of the struggle in the North demobilised a layer of left republicans and left as the dominant ideology a form of nationalism that stressed Irish dependence. The main concern of the Irish government since the banking bailout has been to preserve tax subsidies for transnational companies and this policy has gone largely unremarked and unopposed. An extra factor was the lack of social housing. People had to obtain mortgages to have a home, and were persuaded that they had caused the property bubble and that "we" capitalists and workers, were all equally to blame.

In fact there were demonstrations and strikes led by the trade unions, but each demonstration was followed by partnership agreements with government and employers, further austerity and further demoralisation. In fact key union leaders were centrally involved in discussions around the Irish government's decision to guarantee the banking debt. The trade union leadership managed the austerity hand in hand with government and the Troika. If workers voted against they were forced to vote again until they produced the right answer.

The majority of Irish socialists adapted to this environment and supported a Keynesian economic programme and a wealth tax within the narrow confines of the Troika programme.

However demoralisation did not lead to a break with the union leadership, but rather to workers clinging on with greater desperation to traditional organizations.

right2water

For that reason the revolt against water charges came through existing leaderships and was subject to their weaknesses. The first force to react to the gathering storm was the left trade unions, who sat up "right2water".

The unions had the authority to bring together the spontaneous movement of over 100,000 that sparked off the revolt. However they remained within the social partnership structures of the trade unions. It was revealed that they had collaborated in the establishment of Irish water and overseen the transfer of their members from public authority contracts to become employees of Irish water.

For that reason they walked a narrow ground. Their demand was for no charges but not for the abolition of Irish Water. Their only tactic was to petition the government, moving away from street protests when concessions were made and returning when they realized that the mobilization was continuing. They ignored the right wing of the union bureaucracy even when they attacked the mobilizations but joined in right wing condemnations when demonstrators harassed politicians or groups installing water meters.

The contradictory nature of the movement meant that no democratic national structures were built. A loose alliance left the unions with a free hand. The socialist groups accepted this as they themselves had a sectional perspective focusing on elections - the Socialist party staged a silent split to focus on a non-payment campaign. Sinn Fein allied itself to the campaign but its main contribution was to project itself in government, with a promise to repeal water charges.

Carrot and stick

The government strategy has been to try to demobilise the movement through a combination of carrot and stick. . In this case the government response was avoid the immediate use of water meters, promise a low flat charge, offer a bribe to those who registered and offer assurances that water would not be privatised.

The purpose of the changes was to save Irish Water. If it could be preserved as a commercial government company the Troika programme would be maintained and in the long term privatisation would be assured - Irish water is tasked with a €6 billion renovation of infrastructure to be raised in loans. Once in hock to banks and bondholders there will be no turning back.

Alongside the carrot of reduced charges a programme of repression was unleashed by the government. In working-class areas residents came out to confront gangs installing water meters. Local groups would also picket and harass government politicians when they attended events. The government used the Garda to escort the water meter gangs and the courts to serve injunctions on protestors and form a 20 meter exclusion zone around meter installation gangs. The garda then staged a series of dawn raids. Those who had broken injunctions were swiftly jailed.

The arrests included elected representatives of the Socialist Party and the republican group eirigi. The state indicated that the protests could be reclassified as major crimes – blocking a government limo was described as kidnap and unlawful imprisonment!

The only viable response would have been to build a campaign of civil disobedience focusing on disrupting government, judiciary and the police.

A loose network

Unfortunately, despite a significant mobilization when militants were jailed, the movement remains a loose network pursuing different policies. The trade union left have organized a new demonstration, but it remains focused on a strategy of lobbying. The left focus on a non-payment campaign. Both groups focus on electoral intervention.

Of course the campaign should have an electoral intervention. However at issue is the old dilemma facing socialists. Is the campaign to service electoral campaigns or are the elections to be used to build the mobilisations?

Popular discontent has seen a sharp fall in support for government parties and a rise in support for socialist and republican groups. Around a third of the electorate would vote for independent candidates. However much of the discontent is won by populist or right wing groups. A viable electoralist project would need to include Sinn Fein. They are now in crisis over a history of supporting austerity in government in the North of Ireland and the threat of political collapse if they do not agree to more sweeping cuts.

The overwhelming need is for a national conference of the resistance to set up democratic structures and a series of strategic goals. The immediate aim must be to force the closure of Irish water. If it survives as a commercial company then privatisation will follow.

In a more democratic structure we could interrogate the union leaders and seek to directly approach the majority of workers in Irish water who are in fact seconded from local government contracts and who could close the company tomorrow by returning to their original contracts.

In many ways the Irish working class are now in the mainstream of the European workers' movements. There is now no choice but to fight back. There is a widespread understanding than traditional leaderships have failed. Now the class is experimenting with various forms of resistance, seeking an effective weapon against capitalist oppression.

[1] Charging for the mains water supply to homes was introduced for the first time on 1 October 2014. See [BBC News report](#).