

Ireland's emergency service workers abandon SIPTU union

By Steve James
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Hundreds of emergency service workers in Ireland have left the public service union, SIPTU, because of its refusal to defend its members. Two organisations, the National Ambulance Service Representation Association (NASRA) and the Irish Fire and Emergency Service Association (IFESA), have been established. They are reported to have received hundreds of application forms.

However, the new organisations offer no way forward for firefighters, ambulance drivers and paramedics. They represent an attempt by lower levels of the trade union bureaucracy to neutralise and divert a potential revolt by a key section of public sector workers against the social devastation being implemented by the Irish government and financial aristocracy.

The associations, set up by shop stewards and long-standing union officials, have been created within another trade union, the Psychiatric Nurses Association (PNA) of Ireland. Their stated aim is to advance sectional interests of one group of workers, while abandoning even a nominal effort to defend the broader interests of the working class.

Moves to break with SIPTU were first reported last year, following SIPTU leader Jack O'Connor's decision to repudiate strike plans by firefighters at Dublin airport. A withdrawal of emergency cover would have closed the airport in the midst of a pay dispute with Dublin Airport Authority. As with the rest of the public sector, the firefighters had just suffered a 6.5 percent reduction in their wages through the government's imposition of a hike in workers' pension contributions.

Workers at Dublin Fire Brigade also raised similar frustrations. A spokesman in 2009 said, "The firefighters feel they have been sacrificed by the union

hierarchy and that O'Connor is holding them back in their attempts to resolve their problems."

In the intervening year, SIPTU, along with the other largest public sector union IMPACT, has accepted and sought to implement the 2010 Croke Park Agreement with government and public sector management. This includes a pay freeze, a four-year strike ban and major rationalisations in all areas of public services. In the meantime, the financial crisis in Ireland has dramatically escalated. On December 7, the government confirmed its budgetary proposal to cut €15 billion from social spending over the next four years.

The impact of the cuts on the emergency services will be deadly. At least one fire station in Dublin, Swords, is currently under threat, in a city whose fire provision is already inadequate in comparison with similar cities and populations worldwide. Ireland's fire and ambulance service also appears to have benefited little from the boom years of the so-called Celtic Tiger economy. A 2009 report in the *Medical Independent* said that only 24 percent of calls for an ambulance get a response in less than the internationally recognised standard of eight minutes, in contrast to 75 percent in the UK.

In response to the anger building up amongst emergency service workers, a number of shop stewards and a former SIPTU official opened negotiations with the PNA. On November 15, following an 85 percent vote by PNA members in favour of the ambulance workers' and firefighters' sections joining the psychiatric nurses' union, NASRA and IFESA were publicly announced.

Speaking at a press conference to launch the associations, John Kidd, formerly secretary of the SIPTU firefighters' committee and SIPTU fire brigade

convenor in Dublin, opined that the main problem facing firefighters was the lack of an organisation that spoke specifically for their interests.

While opposing Croke Park, Kidd made clear that this was absolutely not from the standpoint of the broader interests of the working class. He stated, “Our concerns are much deeper and can be traced back over many years when our reasonable claims were not processed, when grievances were not represented, when the aspirations of firefighters were repressed internally [within SIPTU].”

Speaking on RTE’s *Morning Ireland* on December 7, Kidd proposed that a rationalisation of fire-service management would save some of the millions of euros in cuts being sought by the government.

The outlook of NASRA’s leadership is similar. Organiser Derek O’Rourke, writing on NASRA’s blog, explained, “We acknowledge the dire fiscal state of the economy, but in doing so commend our member’s contribution to its resurgence by incurring and accepting an income levy, a pay freeze including the 5 percent benchmarking award still outstanding and withheld by our employer and cuts in allowances.”

He then urged that no further cuts should be imposed, and promised that they would be resisted by “whatever industrial relations means necessary,” without explaining what this might mean.

PNA leader Des Kavanagh welcomed the new sections of his union, promising to “address matters truthfully to the point of bluntness.”

But on the situation facing all public sector workers, Kavanagh was anything but frank. “It is undoubtedly the case that we are currently operating in the most challenging environment ever for workers and their representatives,” he said. “However, this too will pass.”

Elsewhere, Kavanagh made clear that while the PNA formally opposes Croke Park, it has no intention of mobilising workers against it. In a question-and-answer session posted on Meath PNA branch’s Facebook page, Kavanagh was asked what his rejection of the agreement would mean. He responded, “I don’t think anyone really knows.... We deal with challenges every day. This would be just another problem. *In some ways I would prefer the managers trying to impose cuts that the Union’s volunteering for them*” (emphasis added).

Workers seeking a way forward in the face of the

most devastating social onslaught ever seen in Ireland are correct to conclude that SIPTU is opposed to their interests. But SIPTU is not alone, and the PNA’s claim to be a better means to defend the “specialist” interests of psychiatric nurses, firefighters and ambulance workers is no alternative.

In line with the official political parties, the trade unions, whether formally opposed to Croke Park or not, have insisted that Ireland’s enormous banking debts must be paid. To the extent there are disagreements, they are over how long this should take, and on which sector of working people the burden should most heavily fall.

No struggle whatsoever has been launched by any trade union to defend its own members, still less the jobs, wages and social conditions of workers as a whole. This has been the response of the trade unions worldwide to the global financial breakdown, underscoring their essential function as a tool of the financial oligarchy.

In Ireland only one major demonstration was called in 2010, on November 27, by the ICTU. ICTU leader David Begg and SIPTU’s O’Connor were noisily booed, while the platform sought to present the issue at stake as one of Ireland’s “national sovereignty” rather than a class assault by the Irish and international bourgeoisie against the working population. This month, a majority of building union representatives voted in favour of imposing a 7.5 percent pay cut on building workers.

The necessary offensive against the onslaught on workers’ conditions and rights cannot be waged by switching from one union or association to another. It requires a break with the pro-capitalist perspective that is shared by all the trade unions. It requires the founding of new rank-and-file organisations, independent of the bureaucracy and based on a socialist programme.

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