

# Ireland: Unions shut down five-month occupation at Vita Cortex

By Jordan Shilton  
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A deal was reached between union representatives and the management of Vita Cortex earlier this month to end a long-running occupation by 32 employees of a former foam packing factory in Cork.

The occupation, which began last December, was launched after management refused to make promised redundancy payments to the workers. Their determined stand won widespread support across Ireland and internationally, as many recognised that the plight facing the Vita Cortex employees could be their own. Thousands attended demonstrations in support of the occupation, including a march of at least 5,000 through Cork in February. Many visited the occupied factory to deliver supplies and show their support.

The unions sought throughout to prevent this solidarity from developing into a broader political struggle in defence of jobs and working conditions.

The Services, Industrial, Professional and Technical Union (SIPTU) agreed a deal with management at the very point when discussions were taking place within the occupation about the need to broaden and expand the protest.

Just days prior to the announcement of the deal, Vita Cortex management had rejected a mediation proposal by the Labour Relations Commission (LRC), which the unions had urged the workforce to place their hopes in to resolve the dispute.

The agreement the unions then foisted onto the occupation fell well short of their initial demands, and the details were not made public. The outstanding sum due to the workers had been €370,000, but the only official union comment on the deal was that it was “substantially more” than a previous management offer of €170,000.

The former Vita Cortex workers, who now confront a lengthy period of unemployment at best, will be left to

make do with less than 2.9 weeks of pay for every year of service. Some of them had worked at the company for over 30 years, with the 32 having a total of 847 years at Vita Cortex. As official unemployment in Ireland remains high at close to 15 percent, the reality for many is that they will not be able to find another job.

Since the deal was finalised on May 2, the union has not uttered a word on the outcome of the dispute. The workers are maintaining their occupation until they receive the agreed payment from Vita Cortex, which has apparently been delayed.

SIPTU’s push to wind up the dispute was in keeping with its role from day one. Union officials combined rhetorical support with seeking at every point to isolate the struggle. When he visited the Cork factory during the first week of the occupation, SIPTU head Jack O’Connor claimed that he would mobilise workers nationally in defence of the laid-off Vita Cortex staff in the new year. But no action was ever taken, or even proposed, by the union. Instead, they directed the workers to focus their efforts on fruitless protests at the local offices of IBEC, the Irish employers’ organisation, as well as protest stunts at the home of Vita Cortex directors. The stated aim of this campaign was to exert moral pressure on the owner, Jack Ronan, to settle the dispute.

While the occupation was still in its first month, similar disputes broke out at several companies across the country. At Lagan Brick, 29 workers were laid off without severance pay the same week as the Vita Cortex occupation began. At the La Senza fashion chain in Dublin, 114 workers at eight stores were sacked without warning in early January, and at one store, an occupation was launched to obtain redundancy pay. Then at the end of March, workers at

the multinational video game chain Game occupied their shops in pursuit of redundancy payments after the firm entered administration.

Although rank-and-file workers expressed solidarity with each others' struggles—for example, Lagan Brick workers visited the Vita Cortex occupation—the unions worked to prevent the unification of these incipient struggles into a rebellion against the austerity policies of the Labour-Fine Gael government, which created the conditions under which the layoffs took place.

SIPTU encouraged leading figures within the political establishment to publicly support the workers' cause, even as they led the deepest austerity drive in Irish history. A delegation of workers from the Vita Cortex occupation met with the deputy prime minister, and Labour Party leader Eamon Gilmore and Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Enda Kenny visited the Cork plant.

The effect of this strategy was to disarm the Vita Cortex workers in the face of management intransigence whilst boosting illusions in the political establishment and its ability to stand up for the interests of working people. The bureaucracy did not even attempt to call out Vita Cortex workers at other locations to support their former colleagues.

This state of affairs was facilitated by the pseudo-left groups.

In all of its articles on the dispute, the Socialist Workers Party supported SIPTU's line of denouncing Jack Ronan and his unwillingness to make the redundancy payments. The SWP provided no political strategy to broaden the struggle, instead demagogically urging the 32 workers to “shut Ronan down completely.”

For its part, the Socialist Party combined timid criticisms of SIPTU and Irish Congress of Trade Unions officials with the continuous hailing of the unions as the only viable means through which the Vita Cortex workers could conduct their struggle. In a March 7 article the SP made a pathetic call for SIPTU and ICTU to call “a lunchtime work stoppage throughout Cork city and the surrounding area”, which should act as a platform to “support and mobilise for a stoppage to pressurise the government in to taking action.”

This proposal was made in the face of statements from Kenny and Gilmore that the government could do nothing practically to help the workers achieve their

demands.

When the final deal was announced, the SP naturally hailed it as a “success” before being forced to acknowledge that the workers had only been “partly successful in achieving their very modest demands.”

The initial action at Vita Cortex was taken independently of the trade unions and represented an implicit challenge to their role in the destruction of jobs and working conditions across Ireland. But without a political perspective to guide the struggle, the workers' occupation was brought under the control of the union bureaucracy. Preventing this would have required turning directly to the working class for support, independently of and in opposition to the SIPTU bureaucracy and its fake left apologists, based upon an internationalist and socialist programme.

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