

Irish teachers demonstrate in Dublin against pay cuts

By Jordan Shilton
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A protest of between 2,000 and 3,000 teachers took place outside the Irish parliament last Wednesday. Held under the heading “Valuing Education”, it was organised by the Teachers’ Union of Ireland (TUI), the Irish National Teachers’ Organisation (INTO) and the Association of Secondary Teachers of Ireland (ASTI).

Teachers and student teachers attended to show their opposition to pay cuts implemented by successive governments since 2008, which have resulted in salaries for new teachers falling by more than 20 percent. Anger was also expressed at the deep cuts to the education budget ahead of the government’s spending plan for 2013, which will impose further austerity.

Far from an attempt to give voice to these oppositional sentiments, the unions called the demonstration to prevent growing criticism of their own role in the implementation of the cuts from escalating. Despite the fact that the attacks on teachers’ pay and working conditions are proceeding apace across the country, the three organisations limited participation in the rally to its members in Dublin.

The token action allowed the union heads to pose as opponents of cost-cutting and reductions in pay. The speeches of the TUI, ASTI and INTO leaders were exercises in political deception, which no one who has lived through the past four years could take seriously. Head of INTO Anne Fey asserted that the unions would oppose the inequity in the pay of newly qualified teachers and their longer-serving colleagues. She declared, “The teacher unions oppose that decision and will overturn it no matter how long it takes.”

TUI head Gerry Craughwell claimed, “We will mobilise all teachers in defence of the profession and to restore equal pay for equal work. A teaching colleague being paid at a lesser rate is wrong, damaging and an

anathema to collegiality.”

Since the outbreak of the economic crisis, the unions have worked loyally with the government to impose the dictates of the financial elite on their own members, and blocked any opposition that has developed. The signing of the no-strike Croke Park Agreement in 2010 marked a massive intensification of the attacks on the working class. According to recent estimates, it has resulted in yearly savings of at least €1.5 billion through pay freezes, a halt to new hiring and job cuts.

The collaboration of the TUI, ASTI and INTO with Croke Park allowed the Fianna Fáil-Green party government to slash salaries for newly qualified teachers in 2011 by 13 percent, while in 2012, the Labour-Fine Gael coalition imposed a further 20 percent pay cut.

The overall budget for education has been repeatedly cut since 2008 from levels that were already low. The 2012 budget cut education spending by more than €130 million, with more to come in December’s 2013 spending plan. The government is proposing to eliminate a number of allowances that make up part of teachers’ incomes. These include payments to those who teach in the Irish language, as well as overtime pay for teachers willing to cover for sick colleagues or to supervise break-time activities.

These measures, which are replicated in all other areas of the economy, have generated widespread opposition and hostility to the political elite. But this has found no outlet thanks to the unions, which have policed a four-year strike ban. On the one occasion when a national demonstration was called in late 2010 by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU), with hundreds of thousands marching through Dublin, union leaders were heckled and booed by protesters.

Rather than opposing the destruction of public

services and attacks on pay, the unions seek to advise on how best such measures can be forced through. Fey stated at Wednesday's rally, "We are telling the government that there is no room to further cut funding to schools or teachers to classrooms."

She is speaking of persuading a government that has proven during its 18 months in office to be a tool of the financial elite no less than the Fianna Fáil-Green coalition that came before it. Government officials have made it plain that spending cuts and tax hikes of at least €3.5 billion will be implemented in December. Moreover, the absence of any sign of significant economic growth has prompted the troika of the European Union, International Monetary Fund and European Central Bank to warn that austerity may have to be intensified to meet the targets of Ireland's bailout programme for 2013.

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