

Thousands march against water charges in Dublin and other Irish cities

By our reporters
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A protest against the plans of the Fine Gael-Labour Party coalition to introduce water charges in Dublin Saturday attracted 20,000 people according to its organisers. Thousands of others joined protests in cities and towns across Ireland including Cork, Donegal, Galway, Letterkenny, Limerick, Sligo and Waterford.

The water charges are a measure agreed by the Dublin government as part of the multi-billion euro bailout programme concluded with the troika of the International Monetary Fund, European Union and European Central Bank in 2010. They are only the latest attack in the sustained drive to make working people pay for the economic crisis, which began with the collapse of Ireland's banking system in 2008. Since the bailout was organised, every major political party has backed devastating austerity measures resulting in thousands of job losses in both the public and private sectors, wage drops of 20 percent and more, billions in budget cuts for essential services, and tax increases.

As a result, the ruling Fine Gael and Labour and the main opposition party Fianna Fail now command less than 50 percent of public support. Sinn Fein obtains around 20 percent of the vote and "independents"—smaller parties or local politicians who usually were former members of the major parties—around 30 percent.

But despite this level of opposition to austerity and political disaffection, Saturday's protest was far smaller than the 80-to-100,000 that protested the water charges in Dublin last December. It was "organised" by disparate groups, including the group "Dublin Says No"—founded in February last year—and the Peoples Movement for Change. Behind their grand titles and insistence on a "no politics" agenda stand various individuals claiming anarchist, republican or Green politics and others.

They seek to capitalise not only on hostility to the major parties, but also frustration and anger towards groups such as Right2Water, The Anti-Austerity Alliance, etc., and—the real leadership of the protests so far—the pseudo-left Socialist Party and Socialist Workers Party. These groups have opposed the protests becoming the focus for a political struggle against capitalism based on socialist policies, in favour of invocations of "People Power" behind which they seek alliances with various trade union bureaucrats and "left" and not-so-left Independent members of parliament. This has both demobilised opposition and left working people prey to various political charlatans who ensured that Saturday's protest was fairly small, disorganised and without political direction.

There was a lot of anger about the day's events. Typical was Eric who explained, "I've been to all the protests against the charges. But this is the worst so far. No one knows where to go or what is happening. Some people are going to the General Post Office, others to Leinster House (Parliament House) or the dole office. I want the organisers to explain what they thought they were doing.

"Now it gives the politicians the luxury of saying it was only a small crowd, that the movement is dying out. But people haven't been giving in. They want to fight," Eric added.

Leading figures from the SP and SWP were on hand, continuing to insist that "people power" will be able to defeat the charges through a militant non-payment campaign when bills are due in April. The perspective of pressurising the government to change course represents a repetition of the politics advanced by the same pseudo-left forces in previous popular protests, such as the demonstrations against the household charge and the property tax. The lack of any political

perspective to guide the mass public opposition resulted in the government being able to enforce both deeply unpopular measures.

Eoin, an IT worker from the “Clonmel says No” campaign explained why he had come to the Dublin protest with his family. “The reality of modern Ireland is a two-tier society. I’m supposed to be on a 40-hour week but it is much longer most weeks. I first got involved in protesting against austerity with my boys’ school. They were put in a condemned building where council workers were not allowed to work. Then I got involved with people in Clonmel fighting evictions and homelessness.

“The banks should have been allowed to fall. It would have been a private loss. It has happened before and this time Anglo-Irish should have gone. We have to remove the power of corporates from politics, use their revenue and give power to the people. The three things missing from every corporate office in Ireland is accountability, responsibility, transparency. I think the independents have done a good job exposing this and getting action such as the investigation involving Garda McCabe [a policeman and whistleblower on corruption].

“Today is the first time I’ve become aware of the Socialist Equality Group. It needs to be promoted in all ways. We have to support those who stand for the common good for the ordinary people.”

Roisin, a modern history student, said, “It is good you are having a meeting about Trotsky. He was one of the greatest revolutionaries in history and we need someone like him now. It’s obvious that capitalism has nothing to give people today and that the old political structures and paradigms are falling apart.

“I don’t trust a lot of the independents, though. Some of them jumped ship from the old useless parties but haven’t really changed their views. There are some left-wingers, but they seem to me to be getting more and more sucked into the system. They are talking about people power. But real people power is a revolution and I think lots of people are fed up enough to do it.”

Barbara said, “The political landscape has changed. Ireland still has a relatively protected welfare system, but now it’s been rolled back in like all western countries. Greece had a lot more to lose that’s why they went out on a new way with Syriza.

“Once public utilities start to be sold off, that’s what people fear. They know that once the water goes it will be the health service next that would be completely privatised. So all this will filter down. The cuts are never-ending and that is the reason why people are seeking change more than they did two or three years ago.

“My view is that we should not just look at water, but we need to look through a wider lens of social justice. It’s not just about water, it’s about inequality. It’s about poverty. It’s about homelessness. This is Ireland Incorporated. It is no longer a country representing the people.”

Oisín said, “Right now I am stuck in the Irish educational system, so I know as much about politics as I do about basic education, which is next to nothing. But I think the only way is to jump ship and cancel the debt, like Greece says. It was the government and the politicians that borrowed the money, unbeknown to the people. The Irish people will wake up and see that the government will first make 10 percent cuts, leading up to 100 percent cuts. And we will have to fight.”

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