

Northern Ireland Workers Protest Against Drastic Austerity Measures. The Welfare Reform Legislation

By [Eugene McCartan](#)

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On Friday 13 March tens of thousands of public-sector workers took part in a day of action against proposed cuts, job losses, and welfare cuts. Called by the Northern Ireland Committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, it brought public transport, ambulance services and other public services to a standstill.

The trade unions also organized a series of rallies and events, at which members of the public turned out in their thousands to show their solidarity. There were rallies in Belfast, Derry, Newry, Strabane, Omagh, Enniskillen, Coleraine, Magherafelt, Cookstown, Dungannon, and Craigavon.

In Derry the trade unionist Liam Gallagher described the cutting of 20,000 public-sector jobs while claiming that “it won’t have an impact on society” as the “economics of the madhouse.”

Both Sinn Féin and the DUP are now involved in the blame game, to establish who is or is not opposed to this or that aspect of what is called “welfare reform”—for that read “cuts.” On Monday the 9th, Sinn Féin pulled out, withdrawing its support for the budget.

Workers throughout the North of Ireland are angry at Stormont budgets that have cut millions of pounds from public spending; a voluntary redundancy scheme to reduce the civil service by 20,000; and a proposed cut in corporation tax that would see millions shaved off public finances to fund a tax incentive for businesses.

This was a central plank in Sinn Féin’s economic strategy, in the hope of attracting transnational corporations to set up in the North and pay minimal corporation tax, similar to the Republic’s corporation tax system—in other words, to turn the North into a tax haven for corporations and the global rich.

Welfare “reform” has been a major concern and last year threatened the future of power-sharing at Stormont. The five main parties reached broad agreement on a number of issues, including social welfare. Following twelve weeks of talks involving the five parties and the British and Irish governments, the Stormont House Agreement was adopted on 23 December.

Then, on Monday 9 March, Sinn Féin withdrew support for the welfare reform legislation as it was about to go through the Assembly, lodging a petition of concern with the speaker of the Assembly to stop the bill’s passage. What this means is that any vote taken by the members has to have the support of both unionists and nationalists. Proposed legislation will then

pass only if it is supported by a weighted majority (60 per cent) of the members voting, including at least 40 per cent each of those designated as nationalist and unionist present and voting.

This means in effect that, provided enough Assembly members from a given community agree, that community can exercise a veto over the Assembly's decisions.

Implementing the government's changes to the benefits system is a central plank of the Stormont House Agreement. Sinn Féin are claiming that they had secured a commitment that future hardship payments had been protected, while the DUP have claimed that there had never been an agreement to support future claimants, and that such a system would require another £286 million.

The budget could not have come at a more difficult time for Sinn Féin, coming just before the elections for the British House of Commons in May. There is deep resentment and fear throughout the nationalist community in relation to the welfare reform because of the very high rate of unemployment and high level of poverty experiences by Catholics. Sinn Féin have been getting a lot of criticism at the doors from people who have supported the party until now.

The problem that many in the nationalist community feel is that they have no-one else to vote for. The same applies to the Protestant people, who are locked in a sectarian cul de sac by their political representatives and their history.

The main economic power still remains in the hands of the British state, and its economic and social priorities will determine the outcome. What the people of the North of Ireland need or desire is irrelevant to what is in the interests of the British state.

Workers in the North need to maintain and to build their resistance to these cuts, which can be the basis for building unity across the sectarian divide. Through these struggles more and more workers may come to see the limitations of the triple marginalisation they experience and may begin to look for a new and better way forward.

This will not be a return to the gun and the bomb, nor to marching up and down roads waving flags to mark territory: these shibboleths cannot mask the poverty, hunger and unemployment that lie behind the curtains of shattered homes and broken lives.

What both the day of action by workers and the manoeuvring by local politicians show is that the political settlement and the two institutions imposed on the Irish people by the British state nearly a century ago have been a failure. Neither can meet the needs of the people. We must go beyond these two failed entities if workers are to build a society that serves their interests, north and south.

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