

THE DELEGATE

Newsletter of the Bray & District Council of Trade Unions

September 2022

Issue 6/22

COST OF LIVING CRISIS - PROTEST MARCH IN DUBLIN



[L to R: John Anderson (Mandate), Mary Diskin (President) and Mick Ryan (Vice-President)]

The Council was represented at the demonstration held in Dublin on Saturday last, 24th September, to protest against rising living costs. Thousands marched from Parnell Square, up O'Connell Street and on to Merrion Square in the second march this year organised by the Cost of Living Coalition.

The demonstration was supported by more than 30 organisations, including trade unions, Opposition parties and various community groups. Representatives from the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, Dublin Council of Trade Unions, Teachers' Union of Ireland, Unite the Union, Connect Trade Union, Financial Services Union and the ESBOA were among those who attended.

12 year-old activist Sophia Mulvany asked the crowd if, at the age of 12, they understood what it meant to live through a housing crisis or a climate crisis, noting that some of her schoolmates have been "forced to live in hostels or homelessness hubs", channeling climate activist Greta Thunberg when she asked: "How dare you not protect our future?"

Other speakers included Seamus Dooley (ICTU), Fr. Peter McVerry, Niamh McDonald (SPARK - Single Parents Acting for the Rights of their Kids), Richard Boyd Barrett TD (People Before Profit) and Mary Lou McDonald (Sinn Féin).

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CONGRESS REPS OPPOSED TO MINIMUM WAGE INCREASE

The Irish Congress of Trade Unions has confirmed it's two nominees on the Low Pay Commission opposed the inadequate 80 cent increase to the National Minimum Wage. Given the current cost of living crisis and consequent income pressures on woworkers, ICTU and its affiliate unions have been calling for a very significant rise in the minimum wage.

In a statement Congress added: 'The recommended 80 cent increase fails the test of protecting the living standards of those on the lowest wage and fails the test of setting a sustainable foundation for progressing to a living wage. It is for these reasons our nominees opposed the Commission's recommendations and submitted a minority report to provide the Government with an alternative and superior recommendation for the increase in the minimum wage in 2023. It is within the gift of Government to go beyond what the Commission has recommended and we urge them to do so.'

Congress General Secretary Patricia King said she is aware that businesses face challenges 'but so do workers trying to live on a minimum wage and there are many employers that can afford to pay.'

The minimum wage is currently €10.50 an hour. It is understood that the ICTU nominees to the Commission, Fionnuala Ní Bhrógáin and Michael Taft, sought an extra €1.50, to bring the basic statutory pay rate to €12.00 an hour.

They claimed the Commission's recommendation fails to vindicate the living standards of low-paid workers and threatens the introduction of a living wage. According to Laura Bambrick (Congress Social Policy Officer) the ICTU nominees "could not in all conscience justify recommending an 80 cent increase to the hourly rate of our lowest paid workers."

She added: "It amounts to a cut in real terms - a 7.6 per cent increase with inflation currently at 8.7 per cent. It will move us further away from a living wage than where we were at in 2021."

(Congress - 14 September 2022)

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CONGRESS: 'BUDGET MUST PRIORITISE RAISING WAGES AND TARGETED MEASURES ON SPIRALLING ENERGY COSTS'

Launching the ICTU's Budget 2023 priorities, General Secretary Patricia King, said that the forthcoming budget must prioritise raising wages and introduce targeted measures to lift households out of energy poverty and safeguard workers' incomes and jobs.

Ms King said: 'Decent wages for all workers are central to resolving the cost of living crisis'. Average weekly wages (up 2.4 per cent in the year to June) are rising by just one-quarter of the rate of inflation (up 9.1 per cent over the same period).

Ireland remains a low-pay, high-cost country for too many. One-fifth of workers are low-paid according to the OECD, the highest rate among the EU-15. According to the European Commission, the national minimum wage rate in Ireland is the third lowest of EU countries with statutory minimum wages, representing 45 per cent of gross median wages of full-time workers. The accepted international norms are at least 60 and up to 66 per cent gross median wages.

Given the current cost of living crisis and consequent income pressures on low-paid workers, Congress has called on the Government to immediately introduce a very significant rise in the current minimum wage rate.

We are clearly in the midst of a worsening energy costs crisis, one that risks hundreds of thousands of more households into energy poverty and threatens the livelihoods and jobs of tens of thousands of workers. We should not underestimate the seriousness of this developing situation and policy choices should reflect that.

Already 43 per cent of Irish households may be energy poor in 2022, spending at least 10 per cent of their disposable income on heat and electricity, according to the ESRI. Energy costs have shot up by 40 per cent in the year to August. All indications are that energy costs will continue to increase and many more households will fall into energy poverty.

All of this comes against the backdrop of Irish households paying higher fees and charges than those in peer European countries, such as for early years services and public health, education and transport services, alongside a dysfunctional housing system with exorbitant purchase and rental costs.

No such income pressures however are felt by top CEOs of the largest Irish publicly quoted companies whose average pay package rose by 27% to €3.5 million last year, with median pay soaring by 42% to €2 million according to the Irish Times.

(Congress - 14 September 2022)

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'VALUING CARE, RECOGNISING WORK' CAMPAIGN - WORKERS TAKE TO PICKET LINE

Hundreds of community and care workers have taken to the picket line because of the complete failure of the Government to engage with them on their reasonable request for a first pay rise in 14 years.

Already this month, workers employed by community and care organisations have taken to the picket lines in Cork, Kerry, Mayo, Galway and Donegal. The dispute involves members of Fórsa, the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation and SIPTU employed in organisations such as the Irish Wheelchair Association, St. Joseph's Foundation, EmployAbility, Western Care, Ability West, Enable Ireland and selected community employment schemes.

"These are workers who have dedicated themselves to caring for some of our most vulnerable citizens and assisting their local communities. These are workers who never thought they would be forced into taking industrial action to have some degree of respect shown for the crucial work they do, according to Adrian Kane of SIPTU's Public Administration and Community Division.

"Despite representations by bodies such as The Wheel and the trade union led 'Valuing Care, Valuing Community' campaign, the Government is continuing to ignore the demands of these workers. We have written to the Taoiseach requesting a meeting on the issue. His office then referred us on to the Tánaiste who in turn referred us to other Ministers. All have failed to accept that it is the Government which has ultimate responsibility for pay rates in these organisations because it funds them," he added.

(SIPTU - 23 September 2022)

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CONGRESS SUPPORTS CORE FINDING OF THE COMMISSION ON TAX AND WELFARE

The Irish Congress of Trade Unions acknowledges and supports the core finding of the Commission on Tax and Welfare that taxes and social insurance contributions will need to rise materially to meet long-term budgetary challenges.

General Secretary Patricia King said: 'We need to be honest with people. Dealing with the ongoing crises in areas like housing and childcare, properly funding education, healthcare and public transport, and paying for the investments needed to make the zero-carbon transition will cost significant billions. The fiscal cost of an ageing population will also have to be funded. Paying for all of this means more and higher taxes.

'But it is important that those with the broadest shoulders bear the brunt of the cost. Congress is pleased the Commission has heard and agreed with us on this, and to see many of our longstanding policy positions included in the Commission's recommendations.

'The Commission has identified a range of revenue-generating measures targeting wealth, capital income, self-employed income, and unfair tax breaks. Capital income and wealth have for too long been grossly undertaxed compared to income hard-earned by workers.'

She added: 'Congress also welcomes the report's strong emphasis on income adequacy. In particular, a regular benchmarking exercise is undertaken to ensure the adequacy of all working age supports, and other recommendations related to pay-related working age contributory benefits and enhanced child income supports. All workers and households must be insulated from poverty, not only during this cost of living crisis but at all times.

'However, Congress is gravely concerned that a range of unfair tax supports that favour high-income individuals and businesses are recommended for retention. We are also concerned with the inadequacy of employer contributions to the social insurance fund.

'Notwithstanding, our overall view is that this report is an important starting point for an informed discussion about how we can generate sufficient and sustainable revenue to meet the long-term expectations and needs of workers in terms of free at the point of use universal public services and income supports that secure living standards during breaks in employment.

'There can be no going back to the low tax and low spend model that has caused so much of our current problems', she concluded.

(Congress - 14 September 2022)

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BRAY BUILDING STRIKE 1922 - SOLDIERS' ROAD, BOGHALL ROAD

In 1922, Captain Jack Boyle, reckoned the 'worl's in a terrible state o' chassis', and so too was Ireland. In April 1922, midway between the Anglo-Irish Treaty and the outbreak of the Civil War, the ILPTUC [Irish Labour Party & Trade Union Congress] organized a one-day strike 'Against Militarism'.

It was widely supported, not least in Bray. There was great apprehension as to the future at national and local levels. A forgotten aspect of life in that period was the uncertainty in the daily and weekly lives of people insofar as their employment and incomes were concerned.

In April 1922 the Wicklow newspapers published reports on a strike in Bray. They were brief, about 45 and 100 words each, with no follow-up information as to the duration or outcome of the strike. It was ignored by the national press. Nevertheless, the reports provide an important glimpse into the lives of workers in Bray and Wicklow in those times.

The shorter report stated that '250 men had been called out' as they were receiving 55s., and were demanding 60s. per week (1s.3d. and 1s.4¼d. per hour respectively on the recently achieved 44-hour week). They were working on the building of the houses for First World War ex-servicemen by the Soldiers and Sailors Land Trust.

The longer report did not mention wages or the numbers involved. It stated that the workers and their union had refused to work with nine non-union men, and that these men were being paid 1s. per hour (44s. weekly). Although the employer agreed to pay the 'Dublin rate', the dispute was not settled until an undertaking to employ only union members was given. The site was on Boghall Road, the firm involved was Collen Bros., and, although no union was named, it was undoubtedly the ITGWU led by Joseph Metcalfe.

On the basis of the wage rates cited in the Bray dispute, it was what were then called 'builders labourers' that were involved. By contrast a strike of 'agricultural labourers' had commenced in County Wicklow at the end of March when the Farmers' Union proposed wage reductions. In early May 1922 it was settled on the basis that the 'old terms' would apply until February 1923. The wages cited were 35s. for a 54-hour week (6½d. per hour) with a 40s. 'harvest bonus'. The union involved was the ITGWU, led by James Everett TD. This revealed that the hourly rate for agricultural, was less than half that paid to builders labourers.

The decade 1921 to 1931 was one of falling prices and reducing wages. In 1921 the 'Cost of Living Index' stood at 611 (urban) and 864 (rural): and, by 1931 it had fallen to 524 (urban) and 488 (rural). In Bray in May 1922 the 'Rate' struck by the Town Council was 11s. on the £; compared to 12s.6d. (-12 per cent) in the previous year. The 1922 rate would have been reduced to 10s. on the £ had the Council not applied an additional 1s. on the £ for house building. Notoriously, the weekly Old Age Pension had been reduced by 1s. to 9s. in 1924 and, although reinstated in 1927, stringent new conditions for Old Age and Blind Pensions led to a 20 per cent reduction in the overall bill of from £3.18 million to £2.54 million.

In the case of wages, they were reduced several times over the 1920s. A good example was that of the building trades: who were the better organized and probably the more militant workers. In May 1922 the building unions agreed to a reduction of 3d. for craft workers and 4d. for general workers or a 15.78 and 22.22 per cent reduction respectively. That brought the hourly rates to 1s.7d. and 1s.2d., (or weekly wages to 69s.6d. and 51s.4d.) respectively.

By 1931 the building trades unions decided 'enough-was-enough' as far as cuts were concerned. That year building workers were locked-out from 10 January until after Easter, 7 April that year. The employers demanded reductions that would have brought the craft and general workers hourly rates to 1s.6d. and 1s., and to increase the working week from 44 to 46½-hours per week.

The lock-out ended when a 1d. per hour reduction was agreed with no extra working hours. It was the last time wages were reduced for building workers. Whereas the cannier unions had bowed to the realities of the times and acceded to the reductions, public service and other workers suffered repeated reductions too, and could do little to resist into the 1930s. In the early 1920s the ITGWU fought the reductions, and although it met with some successes, they usually only delayed the inevitable cuts. The upshot was that between 1920 and 1930 it had lost up to 75 per cent of its membership and had all but disappeared from County Wicklow.

(Charles

Callan, Labour & Trade Union Historian).

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OWNING MASTERPIECES

A man disguised as an old woman in a wheelchair recently smeared cream cake over the glass protecting the *Mona Lisa*. As he was led away, he told bystanders this was a reaction to people destroying the planet. He is having a psychiatric assessment.

The painting wasn't damaged. Very different, then, from the attack on the Leonardo da Vinci *Burlington House Cartoon* in London's National Gallery in 1987, when Robert Arthur Cambridge fired at

the masterpiece from close range using a sawn-off shotgun. That caused extensive damage from shards of shattered glass and it took years to repair. Cambridge had a political motive too - to express his disgust at the political, social and economic conditions in Thatcher's Britain. He was later treated in Broadmoor psychiatric hospital.

Last month's attack was symbolic. There is no evidence that the perpetrator believed he would damage the painting or that he intended anything other than a publicity stunt. The 1987 London attack, in contrast, was deliberately destructive, and the fragile cartoon, though repaired, won't be the same again.

Leonardo's art has been a target for protesters many times. In 1962 a German artist had already attempted to deface the London cartoon by throwing a bottle of ink at it, but that bounced off the protective glass. In 2009 a Russian woman threw a mug at the *Mona Lisa*, apparently because she had been denied French nationality. Again, the glass did its work.

But in 1911, Vincenzo Peruggia disguised himself as a workman and managed to steal the painting, taking it back to Florence where he hid it in a trunk. It was only returned to the Louvre after he had tried to sell it. His motivation for the abduction seems to have been patriotic: he believed (falsely) that Napoleon had stolen the painting, and that he was doing his duty by returning it to Italy. The recent caking of the *Mona Lisa* is innocuous compared with these acts, all of which posed real threats to irreplaceable works of art.

Leonardo is such an exceptional figure in the history of art, technology and science that it seems reasonable to say his surviving works belong to our world heritage. Their damage or destruction affects us all.

A destroyed Leonardo would be a significant loss to humanity. But if we are shocked and dismayed that some people are prepared to attack such important cultural objects, shouldn't we be concerned, too, that some individuals have works by Leonardo in their private possession? If these works are so valuable to us, shouldn't they be in public ownership for their own protection?

Bill Gates owns the *Codex Leicester*, a Leonardo notebook that he bought for over \$30m in 1994. Within its pages, Leonardo explores scientific topics, including the luminosity of the moon, how water flows and how fossils of sea creatures came to be found on dry land.

Gates puts this on display once a year in a different city around the world each time. But he needn't do so. He could stop this on a whim.

More disturbing, however, is the fate of *Salvator Mundi*, a painting only recently acknowledged to be largely by Leonardo and about which experts still disagree. This was sold for over \$45m to Prince Badr bin Abdullah, who may have been a proxy for the Saudi Arabian Prince Mohammed bin Salman. The painting has now disappeared. It may be on Salman's yacht, in a Swiss bank vault, or elsewhere.

On a libertarian view, any legitimate buying and selling of exceptional works of art like this is fine. That's just how markets work. Many countries have laws preventing cultural objects being exported, anyway.

Legitimate ownership, on this account, gives the owners a right to do more or less anything they want to with their possessions, including smearing them with cream cake if they so desire.

In opposition to this way of thinking, the philosopher Michael Sandel has argued that there should be moral limits to the markets, and that there are some things that should never be sold - your own kidney for instance. Is it similarly morally wrong to sell (or buy) a Leonardo? Perhaps.

If there is almost universal agreement that an artist is truly great, like Leonardo, there's a *prima facie* case for protecting their works from the arbitrary whims of their owners, or indeed preventing them from being privately owned.

The best way to protect culturally important objects is to put them in public ownership in museums. Property rights shouldn't trump the interests of humanity.

(N. Warburton - TNE)

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