



Refusing to yield The fight against the bin tax

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To replace the income lost to local authorities by the abolition of house rates in 1977, the newly elected Fianna Fáil government increased central subvention to local councils, and to fund this major increase in spending the tax take from PAYE grew substantially. However, within a few years the Irish economy, in line with international trends, faltered badly. Unemployment soared, thousands emigrated and the national debt spiralled out of control. A succession of right-wing governments tried to stabilise Irish capitalism in the face of the crisis and a growing radicalisation of the working class. This, combined with the H-Block crisis in the North, demanded some extraordinary measures to ensure the continued ability of the Irish capitalist class to survive and continue the process of capital accumulation. A twin strategy emerged of ferocious cutbacks in public services and the corporatist social partnership process, which co-opted the leadership of the trade union movement to control and divert working class militancy.

It was in the midst of this crisis, as the central state continued to reduce the grants to local authorities and funding of the fairly minimal range of services provided dried up, that a sleight of hand was pulled by a Labour/Fine Gael government. In 1985, the Minister for the Environment, Labour Party leader Dick Spring, introduced water charges. These had no real relationship to the provision or consumption of water, but were simply a local tax to replace the reduced central funding. There was an immediate backlash as working class taxpayers saw this for what it was: double taxation. A campaign of opposition and non-payment quickly took off. The immediate effect was a disastrous local election result for the Labour Party. The struggle took a militant turn in some areas such as Cork and Waterford, with skilled activist teams reconnecting those disconnected for non-payment, but there were problems with the campaign. While non-payment was an official slogan, in practise the campaign increasingly focused on electoral solutions.

The defeat of water charges

During the early 1990s the campaign took on a new lease of life with fresh political elements playing a leading role, especially in Dublin. This led to a revival of the earlier militant tactics despite, or perhaps because of, the increasing use of the courts by local councils to force defaulters to pay arrears. The mass non-payment campaign gained strength in urban working class areas. The final nail in the coffin was the inclusion of the Democratic Left in a coalition government with Labour and Fine Gael in 1994. While they retained no principled objection to the charges, the pressure on this parliamentary rump to take action on the issue on which they had built their careers was immense, and after a decent interval the water charges were abolished.

The water charges victory showed that, while an unusual political conjuncture had dealt the final blow, a mass campaign of civil disobedience could bring about real change in people's lives. A battle had been won, but the war was by no means over. The water charges were abolished, but the local authorities were still entitled to levy service charges. Gradually, local authorities outside Dublin began to introduce charges for various services. However, the dominant right-wing political forces were reluctant to re-engage in battle with working class forces in Dublin, so there was a lull before the next flare-up.

The introduction of the bin tax

Beginning in areas such as Sligo, where ironically they were the child of an opportunistic Sinn Féin/Fianna Fáil alliance, refuse charges were gradually introduced throughout the country. Though cleverly linked to the growing waste crisis by the right, with the assistance of the Green Party, the bin tax was a means by which working people could be made to pay for a problem which was caused by the massive growth of waste, a by-product of the capitalist boom of the 1990s. The rapid accumulation of capital and the relentless drive for profit had a disastrous environmental impact on a national as well as a planetary scale. The truth was that only 15 per cent of waste in Ireland originated from domestic sources, the vast bulk arising from agriculture and industry. The failure of the retail sector to reduce packaging or produce more recyclable packaging also accounted for a large percentage of domestic waste. Yet, in a barrage of propaganda characterising working class people as ignorant environmental reactionaries, amply backed by the liberal media, the government tried to shift the responsibility for the waste crisis firmly on to the backs of ordinary people.

This was a classic example of Gramsci's concept of hegemony. What we saw was an across-the-board assault on the working class. Coercion, as harsh as necessary, was applied to the most advanced forces, but the primary weapon in the ruling class's armoury was dominance of the popular discourse. Through a thousand fields of struggle, from the rightist populism of Joe Duffy's *Liveline* to the obvious ambush of *The Late Late Show*, the message was drummed into people's minds: these people are spongers who don't care about the environment. This dominance failed to impact on the poorer sections of the working class, but it did play a huge role in ensuring that the battle for the hearts and minds of the 'middle class' (largely composed of the white collar section of the working class) was soundly won by the elite.

Reformist responses

Some commentators normally sympathetic to the left, and others allied to the Labour Party, have questioned the involvement of radicals in the anti-bin tax campaign. 'Shouldn't socialists address more important issues, such as the drastic state of the public health service?' they asked. Behind the question, of course, lies a deep ignorance of the reality of life in working class communities. What they failed to see was that behind the popularity of the campaign lay a deep well of alienation and anger amongst communities that had gained little from the Celtic Tiger years. This was not a question of environmental responsibility, but a question of who should pay for waste management and disposal. It was in effect a question of class and, while it might not have been the ideal battleground, it was a very real one. Whether the council's bin truck would collect the rubbish from outside the door of a working class family who had refused to pay their bill was the front line of the class struggle. This was the most intense bout of class struggle experienced in the Republic in years. It would have been incredibly stupid, not to mention unprincipled, of the radical left to fail to engage in this struggle.

In this context, it is worth reflecting on the complete lack of involvement of Labour Party members in the anti-bin tax campaign. Anxious to win middle class votes, the party has consciously abandoned working class communities to Sinn Féin, a stance aptly summarised in the comment made to this writer by a leading Labour strategist: "Fuck Fatima Mansions!"

Our environmental social democrats, the Green Party, have played a shameful role during the campaign. They berated the anti-bin tax activists as enemies of the environment, lauding the tax as an example of the 'polluter pays' principle. The utter failure of the Greens to understand the real nature of the bin tax was a reflection of the party's class base. The Greens are a thoroughly middle class party, having little or no working class support. Another factor has been the dominance of the 'pragmatic' wing of the party whose ambition is to join a coalition government and implement environmentally friendly policies from

above. The more radical environmental activists, largely alienated from the now 'respectable' Greens, were broadly sympathetic to the bin tax protesters, instinctively sympathetic to the anti-establishment nature of the campaign

Sinn Féin has also failed to play any significant role, outside of a handful of areas. What is remarkable about the republican movement is the conservatism of its leading cadres. For a party steeped in a history of armed struggle, they are none too keen on radical activism. Outside a small number of areas, they have confined their role in the bin tax campaign to issuing supportive statements through their elected representatives. Mass direct action left them decidedly uneasy!

The battle of the bins

Fearful of a severe backlash, the mainstream politicians resisted the imposition of the tax in Dublin for a while, though eventually they approved it. The Dublin campaign was weakened by geographic unevenness. The Fingal campaign managed to maintain a very high level of non-payment, and scored a significant victory in the courts when it was deemed that councils were obliged to collect all bins, even those of non-payers. The campaigns in Dublin's other three local authorities were more politically diverse and somewhat weaker in terms of organisation. Despite this, non-payment of the tax was high in working class areas throughout the city.

The struggle entered a decisive stage last autumn. To counter the court victory won by the Fingal campaign, Martin Cullen rushed legislation through the Dáil to allow councils to stop collecting the bins of non-payers. This precipitated a battle royal in Dublin. After securing a deal with SIPTU by promising not to privatise the service, the management of Fingal County Council stopped collecting untagged bins. This ensured compliance in most middle class districts, but provoked determined resistance in working class suburbs such as Blanchardstown. Groups of residents blockaded almost the entire refuse truck fleet in their estates, and a stand-off ensued. The council then got an injunction in the High Court allowing them to prosecute the blockaders defying the court order. This led to the imprisonment of Joe Higgins and Clare Daly. Facing all the power of the police and legal system, the blockades gradually ended and the Fingal campaign levelled out into a phase of political propaganda.

Meanwhile, the battle shifted ground to the Dublin City Council area. Expecting a short, sharp conflict, the City Manager declared in September that he would emulate the Fingal management and begin a policy of non-collection. Predictably this precipitated an immediate response, with activists in working class areas carrying out temporary blockades of bin trucks. This led once again to the courts, and an injunction was granted banning the temporary blockades. Once more people were dragged through the courts and jailed. In Finglas 22 people were brought to court and nine jailed. The same pattern was repeated in South Dublin County. It proved impossible to implement non-collection in much of the City area, and the year ended in a stalemate. Because of the widespread popular resistance the collection of all bins continued in most working class areas outside of Fingal County. The result was a city divided between almost totally compliant middle class areas and great swathes of working class suburbs where the majority continued to refuse to pay.

Tactical differences

It is often said that the real nature of political groups is revealed in the heat of struggle. The bin tax struggle has highlighted the organisational and ideological strengths and weaknesses of the various far left groupings. At the height of autumn's struggle, most far left organisations and individuals were engaged to some extent in the campaign, and a clear difference of perspective emerged.

Some argued for a campaign based on mass meetings and demonstrations, with blockading and other forms of direct action being seen as measures of last resort. The basis for this

view was that the decisive battle would be the local elections of summer 2004, where anti-bin tax candidates could make a breakthrough based on the work done over the years in the different localities. This view was somewhat undermined by the fact that some of those advocating this position represented shadow campaigns lacking a popular base. The perception was that they had adopted this position because they were unable to deliver the goods when it came to mass direct action.

Others advocated mass direct action, especially after the jailing of the activists. In areas dominated by these forces, frequent blockades of trucks and depots occurred. There was little patience from this wing of the campaign for the more cautious, election-orientated strategy. This difference over tactics dissipated somewhat as the threat of non-collection receded in most working class areas of the City Council district.

The union response

Union bosses were posed with a huge dilemma by this battle. On the one hand there was strong pressure from the rank and file to back the bin tax campaign, especially after the jailing of Higgins, Daly and the other activists. It was hard to oppose this pressure, given that it was the official policy of most unions to oppose all service charges. This was compounded by a strong desire by the bin men themselves to show solidarity with their friends and neighbours. On the other hand the bureaucrats were wedded to social partnership and wanted to avoid conflict with the authorities at all costs.

While mouthing platitudes favourable to the campaign, the leaders of the main unions organising bin workers, SIPTU and IMPACT, worked hard behind the scenes with management to ensure the success of non-collection. At some stages tensions bubbled to the surface, with truck drivers refusing to drive out of depots blockaded by activists despite shop stewards and union officials pressurising them to do so. By far the worst intervention was that of David Begg, the leader of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions. While Joe Higgins and Clare Daly languished in jail, he attacked the campaign and its leaders. Of course, this received maximum publicity in the media, with every attempt made to portray the anti-bin tax campaign as a crafty loony-left ploy to dupe the gullible working class.

The only leading trade unionist backing the bin tax campaign was Mick O'Reilly of the ATGWU. The other source of support was the traditionally radical Dublin Council of Trade Unions, which organised a mass demonstration to oppose the imprisonment of the activists. The paucity of union support is a reflection of the weakness of the left in the unions. There is no use appealing to a union bureaucracy which has a real material interest in opposing working class militancy both in the workplace and in the community.

What next?

Both sides are now holding their fire, preparing for the next round. The establishment politicians want to avoid a re-run of the bitter conflict of last autumn, at least until after the summer elections. They know that another round of blockades and arrests would galvanise working class communities, and boost support for Sinn Féin and far left candidates. Undoubtedly, they are leaning on local authority managers to hold back until the elections are over. This may not be enough to rein in the bureaucrats. The Dublin City Manager secured a 23 per cent increase in the bin tax in December with the support of the right-wing parties and the Greens on the City Council. In January, South Dublin County Council introduced the tag system. The possibility exists that the campaign may enter a decisive phase before the elections.

The tagging system has proved very difficult to defeat, making a non-payment strategy extremely difficult, but in a strange way tagging and the proposed pay-by-weight system are a sign of the success of the campaign. We have forced the right-wing parties and the local bureaucracy to acknowledge the inequity of the service charges. Of course, these

cosmetic changes do not change the inherent injustice of the bin tax, but do indicate a desire by the authorities to disguise this inequity.

With most political forces involved in the campaign concentrating to a greater or lesser degree on electoral work, there is a danger that the campaign may degenerate. Activists may put all their energy into canvassing and leafleting, neglecting to continue the grassroots organising needed to sustain the struggle against the bin tax. The more cautious elements in the alliance may use the run-up to the elections to argue against direct action, on the basis that any sort of illegal action will damage the electoral prospects of candidates. The predominant tendency at the moment seems to have swung towards an over-concentration on the importance of the local elections. This over-reliance on electoral activity is a constant danger to campaigning organisations. It's not necessarily a question of opportunism, but of the logic of bourgeois democracy drawing left organisations further and further into a morass of petty electoral and clientelist activity, to the detriment of day-to-day grass roots activism. This is not to argue against participation in the local elections, but to argue for caution in doing so. The only solution to this is for local campaigns to continue to engage in the ground work that will allow us to confront the authorities in the next big battle. This can only happen if the various left organisations continue to devote some of their energies to the anti-bin tax campaign.

Another factor that will influence the direction of the campaign is the inevitable re-introduction of water charges. This is not a matter of conjecture but of fact: all new houses are now being fitted with water metres, and the Dublin local authorities are preparing the necessary databases. The bin tax is the thin edge of the wedge, as more and more public services are commercialised and privatised. No service will be safe, with even talk of the maintenance of social housing in Dublin City being contracted to multinationals. However, by adding water charges to the bin tax, the bureaucracy may bite off more than they can chew. Disconnected water mains can be reconnected, and indeed were during the last campaign. The stage may well be set for a massive struggle over a host of service charges.

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