

# Where now for Irish Trade Unions? Brid Smith talks to Jimmy Kelly of Unite the Union

Brid Smith



Jimmy Kelly

Irish Marxist Review has always proclaimed the crucial role played by trade unions in the struggle for socialism while also recognising the vacillating role of the trade union bureaucracy, especially in Ireland with its close ties to the Labour Party and the government. Earlier this year saw a splendid vote by rank-and-file trade unionists against the Croke Park 2 but the ICTU leadership wasted no time in resting defeat from the jaws of victory with the Haddington Rd. Agreement. However it is clear with the strike of the Dublin Bus workers and some other disputes that there is a certain revival of trade union militancy taking place and this is being accompanied by efforts on the part of some trade unionists such as SIPTU Grassroots to organise to reclaim the unions from their conservative and compromised leadership. In this context Brid Smith has interviewed Jimmy Kelly, Regional Secretary of Unite the Union who are one of the sponsors of the Peoples Assembly against austerity at the Dail on the 18th September.

**Brid Smith:** Many union officials were clearly surprised by the vote against Croke Park 2, did it surprise you?

**Jimmy Kelly:** No not at all surprised - following Croke Park 1 wage cuts and job losses, public sector workers felt they were being made the scapegoats for the Government's failures on the economy. They also felt they were lied to in that none of the savings achieved in CP1 were shared, as had been promised in the agreement, let alone the fact that the agreement was still not finished, it still had another year to run.

UNITE joined in a VOTE NO alliance with three other unions, the INMO, CPSU and IMO. We arranged public meetings around the country, we took the campaign against the wage cuts and further job losses to the membership and explained exactly what every clause in CP2 meant. The result of the vote was a fantastic demonstration of workers showing their willingness to fight back against the Government and a hostile media.

**BS:** Can you give us your analysis of the vote and the main factors involved?

**JK:** It was most certainly a vote which reflected the anti-austerity mood among all workers both Public and Private. I felt workers were seeking leadership across the sector, a leadership prepared to use the strength of a united public sector standing up for their rights on jobs, wages and pensions but also fighting for the principles of a top class public service in Health, Education and Local Authorities. The No vote I think gave us the opportunity to deliver an important victory, in fact an historic victory for workers in Ireland and which

could also be responsible for inflicting a serious setback for this coalition Government in their drive to make workers pay for an economic crisis not of our making. The Government had threatened to impose the wage cuts through emergency legislation if they were rejected by the workers - but now in the face of this rejection I believe that the Government would not have had the confidence to impose the cuts.

**BS: What then of developments following the vote?**

**JK:** The ink was hardly dry on the ballot papers rejecting CP2 when the efforts were underway to undo the fantastic stand taken by public sector workers through their massive rejection of CP2. The new process was undertaken by the Labour Relations Commission and facilitated by unions who were prepared to break up the strength of a united public sector through engaging in sectoral talks and bargaining on the rejected CP2. What emerged from those talks - the Haddington Road proposals, essentially the same as CP2 - was then put to Ballot. Without the sort of leadership which should have followed the first ballot I think workers felt let down and demoralised by the behaviour of union leaders and therefore probably felt there was no alternative to acceptance.

**BS: There would appear to be a certain revival of the left in the unions. Is this your impression?**

**JK:** I think there is still the possibility of a real fightback on behalf of workers' rights, employment rights and trade union rights. The anti-austerity campaign is still central to everything we do and can still be defeated. We need more unity based on the example of the NO alliance in the campaign against CP2 along with the left be-

coming more centrally active in our unions.

**BS: What do you see as the main tasks facing the left in relation to Irish trade unions?**

**JK:** Our main tasks are for turning around the campaign of Government and employers in their attacks on wages and conditions. Austerity has failed. From the beginning, the trade union movement and progressive organisations knew that austerity would fail. It drives down growth, employment and income, resulting in a poorer economy and society. International agencies and domestic commentators are coming to the same conclusion.

Now is the time to end austerity in Ireland. Economics is about choices - political choices. Unite's proposals, and our analysis of their likely impact, show that - even within current financial constraints - we can make better choices and achieve better outcomes. End austerity - and you end the 'need' for austerity.

Wage stagnation has now become a characteristic of the Irish economy. Real wages are actually falling, at a time when working people are having to cope with increased taxes and charges while at the same time trying to get out from under debt. Those who are already at the bottom of the economic pyramid are experiencing the greatest drop. Of particular concern is a significant wage fall in the hospitality sector, where workers are already amongst the lowest paid. These workers have seen an average drop in weekly earnings of nearly 10 per cent after inflation over the past two years.

Recent budgets have sucked money out of the economy through tax increases and spending cuts, and this continuing wage stagnation simply adds another damper to an already struggling economy. Increasing wages and income floors must be part of

the recipe for economic recovery.

We should build for massive protests against austerity but we have got to have strike action as part of our fightback. I am confident that the struggle against austerity which of course is not a policy but is a weapon to shift resources from working people to the wealthy in society can

lead to a victory for our class. The good news is that there is an alternative - we must fight for that alternative through a united campaign with a united left embracing public and private sectors, workers and unemployed - now is the time to get better organised.