

A time for solidarity

Pay cuts

Teachers are enraged by the second pay cut in less than twelve months. Combined pay cuts over the last year have reduced teachers' pay by 15% on average. Even our very low paid non-permanent teachers on reduced paid hours have had to bear the full impact of these unfair and inequitable cuts. A high quality workforce is demoralised and embittered by this callous mistreatment. Prior to the Budget on December 9th the trade unions made a genuine and generous effort in good faith to forge an agreement with the Government. The Government made a major error in rejecting an agreed way forward and we all now deal with the logical consequences of that rejection.

This is a critical time for teachers, public servants and trade unions. After years during which we made agreements with our paymaster – the government – it has chosen to cast aside rather than involve the procedures and processes that deal with its employees and rule by fiat.

We are now out in the cold and we must react to this situation. An article in a Sunday paper stated on December 13th: "It is too early to say that the trade unions have been broken – the next three months will be the test of that – but they are no longer wagging the government dog".

The budget decisions on pay will result in a drastic reduction in the standard of living of all public servants, including teachers. In this time of crisis, where our capacity to represent our members is being challenged, it is vital above all that we preserve our unity and trade union solidarity.

Over the past 100 years the ASTI has dealt successfully with crises and challenges through the loyalty of members and we will overcome this crisis.

A fairer, better way

The trade union movement has always believed that there is a fairer, better way to deal with the crisis. And the fairer, better way demands an answer to the question: is the low tax model pursued by successive governments sustainable in the current crisis if we are to have the decent public services that any civilised society deserves? The answer is that the low tax model is no longer sustainable and Garret FitzGerald, in his analysis of the Budget, stated that reform of the tax system is needed to bring us into line with European norms.

Corrosive criticism

We have been through an extraordinary period whereby an unholy alliance of the right wing press, stock broker economists and big business has engaged in a campaign of vilification of public servants and of their trade unions. This corrosive criticism is likely to continue and intensify as our campaign to defend teachers and education continues over the coming months. We must, therefore, be unified in our response; unified internally in the ASTI and in solidarity with other teacher unions and with other public sector unions representing civil servants, local government employees, prison officers, fire-fighters, nurses, etc.

Strategy of public service unions

The Public Services Committee of Congress which represents civil servants, local government employees, teachers, lecturers, prison officers, fire-fighters, nurses, etc. has adopted a strategy which includes provision for further strikes, if necessary. The industrial action element of the strategy includes the possibility of:

History of the ASTI
 'Unlikely Radicals:
 Irish Post-Primary
 Teachers and the ASTI
 1909 – 2009'
 by Dr. John Cunningham,
 will be published in
 mid-January.

- ◆ Selective strike action to be used intermittently alongside a sustained work-to rule non-cooperation campaign
- ◆ Other forms of disruptive action
- ◆ Targeting specific areas in response to the threat of compulsory redundancies
- ◆ Demonstrations and protests in conjunction with service users as appropriate
- ◆ Consideration of a wide-scale strike at a strategic point in the campaign.

There will be a blanket refusal to cooperate with transformation proposals.

The union campaign will also involve extensive and ongoing political and public relations work, and an exploration of the legal options in the face of pay cuts and any future changes to pension entitlements.

To ensure its success, the campaign will require members of all unions to support and participate in the actions agreed by the Public Services Committee. Their unions will work together to coordinate and maximise the impact of the campaign, while ensuring that individuals and groups of workers cannot be sidelined or victimised by management for participating in the campaign to protect their jobs and incomes, and the services they provide to the public.

Meeting with teacher TDs

At a meeting between the presidents and general secretaries of the four teacher unions and teacher TDs in late December, we emphasised, particularly to the government TDs present, that the proposed changes to the pensions were totally unacceptable. The changes to the pensions are not signed, sealed and delivered and over the coming weeks and months this must be a major focus of our campaign.

CEC decides on action

ASTI CEC at a meeting on December 19th, called by the President, adopted a document which sets out a series of actions as part of a sustained campaign of resistance against the draconian budget decisions. These actions include:

Firstly, industrial action - we have a ballot of members sanctioning industrial action, including strike action, in coordination with the other teacher unions. CEC adopted a motion calling for four rolling half-day regional strikes in association with the other teacher unions.

Secondly, an absolute refusal to cooperate with any government change agenda. The Government has decided to act unilaterally through diktat. They have rejected partnership, consultation and consensus – whatever we normally call the process of hammering out agreements that everyone can live within. The ASTI will not cooperate with their so-called reform agenda. This is also the unanimous position of all the other unions.

Thirdly, we must implement our directives in a vigorous manner and see that they are universally implemented. Consideration will be given to withdrawing from specified voluntary activities.

Fourthly, we must continue to lobby politicians. It is they and not civil servants who made the decisions to cut our pay and attack our pensions; it is they who must feel the heat from the electorate in their constituencies; it is they who have supported the unrestrained, unregulated operation of the market which has created the fiscal crisis; it is they who gave the rich what has been called a massive Christmas present in the Budget. It was they who announced a savage attack on pensions as well as the pay cuts.