

## TULF's submission on Right2Water policy document

Firstly we would like to thank the R2W unions for opening up this process, and we welcome the opportunity to submit our thoughts on a policy document for a progressive Irish government.

The reference to the Democratic Programme is important. This programme represented a brave and radical social, political and economic vision for Ireland that had the support of working people and the most advanced elements of both the republican and the trade union movement. However, we must keep in mind the fact the Free State and subsequent governments of Ireland have never sought to implement such a programme, because it is not in their class interests to do so. This state is a compromise with imperialism, and it will not help deliver any meaningful change for working people.

Today, the fact that five unions have been central to the biggest mass mobilisation and social movement in decades is in itself a progressive turn, constituting an important step forward for the trade union movement and for workers more generally. For too long, unions have been formally on the sidelines of important political and social struggles.

It is crucial to the future of the union movement, and to working people generally, that we in the movement develop a coherent and concrete programme, with workers and communities, that challenges the power of capital and big business in Ireland. If we are to secure lasting gains and increase our collective power, the movement must have a political agenda and a vision that empower working people and shift the balance of power in the country towards working people.

We have seen how easy it is in a crisis for companies and the government to do away with gains that took decades of struggle by working people to win. In a short number of years,

defined-benefit pension schemes have been virtually wiped out, the working week lengthened, pay cut, unemployment greatly increased, contracts made more flexible for capital, and much more. While unions are now beginning to win difficult pay increases again, these are wiped out through increased taxes and the monetisation or privatisation of social services. Unions need to push for a coherent programme that sees wins in the work-place, complemented and enhanced by legislation and the provision of quality public services.

Politicians and political institutions must be held to account; and unions, as a vital democratic institution with more than 650,000 members in Ireland as a whole, constituting the largest worker-led and worker-controlled structure in the country, can do that.

The Trade Union Left Forum, made up of trade unionists from both public-sector and private-sector unions and communities, has called for such a political programme on a number of occasions and has held a number of meetings on this topic. In one such call we said of the trade union movement:

*We need our own independent political programme and to mobilise our members around it.*

*Parties and Independents who agree with the programme or parts of it can sign up to it and pledge their support. The movement then, not tied to any one party or to a government, is free to campaign and pursue its agenda with its supporters in the Dáil, in the Seanad, and in local councils.*

*The next election is likely to return an even more diverse result in parties and*

*independents. The trade union movement needs to put itself in the strongest position possible to influence politically for our class.*

(<http://www.tuleftforum.com/independent-political-programme-trade-union-movement-workers/>)

We welcome the fact that, following clear messages from workers and communities, the R2W unions have expanded their social agenda and seem to be doing their best to put such a union political programme together. This is not an easy process, and there will be many detractors along the way, and as many political opportunists who will only seek to use this process to further their own short-term electoral gains. These forces exist and serve only to increase disillusionment and frustration. They do great harm to working-class unity and solidarity.

The coming election is just that: an election. It will not radically alter Ireland, because for that to happen organised workers would need to be leading a mass, organised political and industrial movement, and that is not the case right now, despite the huge groundswell around the water movement. Unions need to be planning for the long term and establishing the vision and programme now that will be educated and agitated for over the coming years. The R2W movement, the coming election and the growing unity of community and workers' groups should be seen and acted on as progress towards an organised political and industrial movement; but this will not happen overnight, and short cuts do more damage than good.

### **Clarity and unity on the aim of any programme is crucial**

The age of the historic compromise between capital and labour is over. The conditions that gave rise to this compromise no longer exist. War

reconstruction was completed a long time ago; the “threat” of socialism from the USSR and eastern Europe no longer exists; union density has steadily declined; anti-imperialist regimes in the Third World have been destroyed; and technology has made the economy truly global, creating billions of unemployed potential workers who can be exploited at far cheaper rates of pay.

Inequality and the maximisation of profits exacerbate over-production and insufficient demand, driving financialisation and debt and greatly increasing instability within the system—meaning that we are likely to see more crises and deeper crises, which will continue to attack workers' rights and conditions of employment and life. To reminisce about that time or to make demands for a return to such times is utopian and dishonest.

And even if the conditions for re-creating the “golden age” for labour existed, is the limit of our ambition to slightly improve our conditions at the expense of workers elsewhere in the world?

Repeating the demands of the 1950s and 60s is simply not good enough. In many ways, now more than ever, it is a question of socialism or barbarism. But making the *demand* for socialism is not the same as actively trying to build socialism. We must develop a programme that has socialism as its goal but that can attract mass support, based on present conditions and forces. This programme must evolve as class-consciousness develops, and it must be a process of education and agitation rather than a static set of demands given to “politicians.”

In Ireland, now, we must assess the balance of forces and the obstacles to socialism and build a real plan around this—one that challenges power, rebalances power in our favour, and so begins to transform society, making the demand for socialism not merely a slogan but a living, meaningful experience and struggle by workers and communities, with unions at the heart of this.

This is what is both needed and possible if we want it and work towards it.

And so we must be clear and explicit in our desire to pull forces together, with the maximum, broadest possible unity, committed to transforming Ireland in the direction of socialism. This will not be done overnight, and that should not be attempted. There are no short cuts, no easy solutions, no quick fixes, and no contradiction-free routes to a better world. We must be honest with people about this in order to win lasting support for such a programme— support that will not ebb and flow with the latest scandal or headline, support that is driven by a deep political commitment and a desire to be involved in the transformation of Ireland.

### **A comradely critique**

The R2W campaign is a brave and positive development from the five unions. Providing a national campaign to the local water movement in the first place was a good initiative, and not an easy one, as so many other unions didn't support and some even opposed the initiative. Taking action outside the movement's national structure and taking the initiative is to be applauded; and to further develop the campaign to look at pressing social, political and economic issues and attempt to co-ordinate a more united intervention in the coming election is again a brave step.

However, the draft programme is not clear, or honest, in what it should be. Is it to build a nicer form of capitalism, a capitalism of equality?— something we know is not possible. Or is it to start a process of building socialism in Ireland? Vagueness only adds to confusion, disorientation, and ultimately division within our class and movement. We need a programme that explicitly says that its aim is to move Ireland towards socialism by empowering working people, by

restricting the role of private capital, and by strengthening public ownership and wealth.

If the aim of the programme is to entice those standing in the elections to make a commitment to it, or parts of it, then again it is too vague and non-directive to hold anyone to account. One could see a wide range of individuals and parties signing up to some of these rights through electoral opportunism, with no real commitment. If this happens it will lead to further disillusionment and contempt among our class. It is also disempowering to hand demands to "representatives" and merely hold them to account. As suggested earlier, the programme should be an evolving, mobilising process of raising class-consciousness and agitating to win its demands, rather than handing them to elected representatives to deliver.

The programme needs to be explicit not only in its aim of moving Ireland towards socialism but in how it is going to do this in deliberate and strategic ways that challenge the power of capital in Ireland.

Public ownership, not only of water, should be demanded. Our natural resources should be publicly owned and used as a platform on which to build up public industry and enterprise. In this regard it should be explicit in saying that we do not honour commitments or contracts signed by previous governments, and that we will nationalise our resources at the expense of private companies.

On the question of debt, rather than a vague call for citizen-led movements in Europe and responsible debt reduction strategies, name the debt we are not responsible for, and call for its repudiation. *It isn't ours, so we won't pay it.* If the debt-collectors want it they can trace it back to those responsible. This is not irresponsible. Yes, it will create problems for Europe, but that is the responsibility of capitalism, not of working people.

In regard to democratic reform, minor reforms of existing structures are entirely insufficient to rebalance political power in the state. Democratic reform is also about reform of the economy, the media, industrial relations and collective bargaining, and political institutions. Citizens should have access to the media and to political structures so as to participate in debate and influence legislation. If important legislation or budgets were published and open to a public consultation and participatory process, with politicians recallable following Dáil votes, public petition, or a vote by county councils, this would enhance democracy and shift the balance to people and away from private executives, senior civil servants, and back-room processes.

A significant public process should be opened up to rewrite a constitution for a new republic in the twenty-first century. It's close to a hundred years since the Proclamation of the Irish Republic in 1916 and the Democratic Programme of Dáil Éireann in 1919, and almost eighty years since the adoption of the Constitution of Ireland in 1937.

The Trade Union Left Forum certainly does not possess all the answers, and so it will not go into detail on the areas of health, education and housing or other issues that should be included, such as the contradiction of building a democratic state while being a member of the highly undemocratic and anti-worker European Union. But this contradiction needs serious consideration and should not be avoided. 'With or without the EU and the euro' should be the policy adopted by a progressive Irish Government. If withdrawal is necessary well then it must be pursued.

But on the issue of workers' rights and unions, the TULF has previously outlined what progressive legislation on collective bargaining should include:

- a recognition of union membership and collective bargaining as a basic human right;
- a legal right and a mechanism for compulsory recognition of a trade union for employees by employers;
- broad outlines of what constitutes collective bargaining and negotiating mechanisms and an avoidance of minimal consultation-style frameworks;
- a clear understanding of a "trade union" as an independent registered trade union and not a staff association established by the management;
- the right of trade unions to have access to workers in their work-place, to ensure that all workers are given the right to organise a union free from intimidation;
- the right of access to existing members where collective bargaining already exists;
- protection for union members from penalisation, discrimination or disciplinary action for carrying out legitimate trade union activity;
- legal protection for the collection of union subscriptions at source; and
- economically harsh fines and penalties for companies found to be in breach of the legislation, so that it is not economic to illegally avoid unions.

In addition to this—and this is fundamental to rebalancing power in the state away from private capital and to working people—the Industrial Relations Act (1990) should be repealed. The right to strike should be protected and empowered by new legislation that would make striking easy for workers, that would allow for secondary and solidarity pickets, and that would allow strikes for more than just immediate reasons of working conditions.

If this programme is not just a list of requests for capital to give to working people, then it must actively take power away from capital. This is fundamentally what gives a programme

transformative potential, as opposed to a mere list of reforms. Some may balk at this, but working people should be empowered to strike to bring down a government as well as to cease production. This provides political power to working people and provides meaning to democracy in the state.

We hope you will take into consideration this submission and the many others you will no doubt receive. This is a welcome process, and the unions should be proud of the progressive steps they have taken in recent times. While there are always detractors—too many on the left—it is important that unions remain focused on pulling together progressive forces and a transformative agenda, as this is ultimately in the interest of all our members, working people and the unemployed, and society more generally.

**A hundred years ago unions played a central role, from the Lockout to the Rising to the Irish Revolution. We can do so again today.**