

The Irish water war

Rory Hearne

Ireland has been held up as an example by the international political and financial elite, the Troika, and particularly European leaders such as the German government, as a successful bailout model that maintained social order and achieved popular acceptance of the necessity of austerity and financial sector bailouts. A series of austerity Budgets implemented from 2008 to 2014, along with conditions imposed as part of the international bailout from 2010 to 2013, involved cumulative cuts to public spending, social welfare and raising of taxes, predominantly on middle and low income households, of over €30bn. The bailout of the private banking sector and developers cost the Irish people €64bn, equivalent to just under a third of Ireland's GDP. Proportionally, the Irish people paid, per capita, the highest cost of bailing out the financial institutions in Europe. The impact of these policies has been visible in the deprivation rate rising from 11% of the population in 2007 to 25% in 2011 and then, in 2014, to reach a staggering 31% - almost 1.4 million people. This includes 37% of children suffering deprivation (which is up from 18% in 2008).

Yet, the question remained – why were the Irish people not protesting? While anti-austerity protests raged across Europe and new movements such as the Indignados emerged, there were no protest movements on such a scale in Ireland. This apparent absence of protest in Ireland has been the subject of international comment and domestic debate (Allen & O Boyle, 2013; Brophy, 2013; Cox, 2011; Hearne, 2013;). The former Minister for Finance, Brian Lenihan, commented in April 2009 that other European countries were 'amazed' at the Irish Budgetary adjustments and that there would be "riots" if these were introduced in other countries. Indeed, the Irish Taoiseach, Enda Kenny, was 'rewarded' with an appearance on the cover of Time Magazine in October 2012 where he explained to the world that there had been no large-scale demonstrations in Ireland because "(Irish) people understand that you have to do difficult things to sort out our own public finances". In this context many expressed surprise at the emergence of the water charges protest movement in 2014 that involved direct community resistance to the installation of water meters and hundreds of thousands protesting on the streets.

Questions have been raised about whether or not this new water movement is a single issue campaign, an anti-austerity movement, or if it represents a more fundamental transformation of the Irish people's approach to and involvement in politics? In order to address these questions myself and a group of interested Masters students from Human Geography in Maynooth University developed and undertook a questionnaire survey of water protestors. In just over a week, 2,556 participants filled out the detailed questionnaire which covered three broad areas including protestor's rationale for engaging in the protests, level of involvement in the movement, views on the effectiveness of the movement, next

steps, the role of the media, voting intentions and desire for a new political party. The results of the survey are detailed in the report published recently entitled, *'The Irish water war, austerity and the 'Risen people'*. Before describing some of the main findings I will provide a short overview of the emergence of the water movement.

In spite of the portrayal of general passivity, the truth is that the Irish people did protest against austerity and within these protest lie the origins of the water protests. For example, tens of thousands of pensioners, students and community projects protested in 2008 and 2009. More than 100,000 participated in the Irish Congress of Trade Union (ICTU) organised march in February 2009 and 150,000 attended in November 2010 against the imminent Troika bailout. But ICTU's opposition to austerity was restricted to just four one-day national protest events in the period between 2008 and 2013. ICTU organised no protest in the entire two-year period between November 2010 and February 2013 and did not even participate in the European Confederation of Trade Unions' coordinated day of 'Action and Solidarity' against austerity in October 2012. Senior trade union officials argue that they were trying to maintain social peace because they were worried about collapsing the banking system, frightening off foreign investors and they were afraid of 'losing the battle' and the imposition of even worse conditions, and worked on selling pay cuts, pension levies and other cuts to their own members.

At the 2011 General Election the Irish people expressed their anger at the bailout and austerity in the 'pencil revolution' by decimating the conservative party that had dominated Irish politics, Fianna Fáil, and electing another conservative party Fine Gael, in coalition with the centre-Left, Labour Party. But it became apparent to many that the new government's promises of standing up to Europe, bondholders and the Troika would not be fulfilled. ICTU, and many other civil society organisations decided not to protest due to the reasons outlined previously, but in addition, they now also supported the Labour Party in government and thus any hint of potential opposition was considered disloyal and counterproductive. There was silence from the civil society 'insiders' such as the leadership of ICTU and the large public sector trade unions, some charities and NGOs as they decided they were on the side of the defending the establishment while the most vulnerable paid the price of the crash through austerity policies such as cutbacks to social welfare payments, reductions in funding for social housing, lone parents and disability payments, the household charge, and to funding community projects.

In this context those who wanted to oppose austerity, the government failures, the bank debt etc – the middle and low income workers, the discriminated and marginalized - realised that they would have to take action themselves and look beyond the traditional parties and civil organisations to organise and mobilise resistance and get their interests represented.

Into this vacuum small grassroots community and Left activist protests emerged to support in resisting austerity. These included the Occupy protests in 2011,

anti-austerity Budget protest organised by the Dublin Council of Trade Unions, disadvantaged communities who were being decimated disproportionately from the cuts ('the Spectacle of Defiance'); the anti-bank debt 'Ballyhea Says No to Bondholder Bailout' group set up in March 2011 (involving ordinary citizens with no previous political involvement, starting in a small rural town in Co. Cork organising weekly protests that continue to the present, and 'Says No' groups spread to a number of other towns and cities across the country). There were also very large protests in response to the rationalisation of hospital services, with 8,000 people attending a protest in Roscommon town (population of 12,000) in August 2010 and 15,000 in Waterford city (population of 50,000) in 2012. While these could be seen as traditional particularist protests what is significant is their scale and that they were organised by local community activists rather than traditional organisations. They show that where protest was organised, large numbers participated. It also highlights a concern with the downgrading and dismantling of the public health system, an issue that worsened under austerity. There were also disability groups, new youth protest groups (We're Not Leaving), lone parents, special needs assistants, and successful protests against plans to sell off the national forests.

April 2012 saw the largest anti-austerity protest, and the foundations for the water charges campaign, when half the population refused to pay the newly implemented household or 'property' charge. This protest is not given sufficient recognition as it contradicted the narrative that the Irish passively consented to austerity as the necessary 'medicine' for recovery in contrast to the Greeks, Spanish and others. The 'Campaign against the Household and Water Taxes' involved socialists from the far left trotskyist parties, Left independents, community independents, anti-debt activists, and community groups. Tens of thousands of people participated in protest marches and local actions. This movement contributed to the largest expression of resistance and opposition from the Irish people to austerity prior to the water charge movement. There was a mass boycott of the charge initially when 49 per cent of the 1.6 million households liable for the charge refused to pay it by the deadline of April 2012. Indeed, by September 2012, there was still a 40% non-payment rate nationally. The transfer of power to the Revenue Commissioners to collect the charge from wages or welfare packets made it very difficult for the campaign as people had no choice but to pay the charge. The leadership of the campaign also fell apart as a result of infighting between the two far left Trotskyist parties.

The Anglo Not Our Debt Campaign also gained momentum in this period as public opposition grew in 2012 and early 2013 against the annual repayment of €3.1bn of the €30bn Anglo Bank debt. In February 2013, ICTU organised its only protest against the current Government. A reported 100,000 marched across the country against the Anglo debt and austerity. In the run up to this protest, the government proclaimed a 'deal' on Irish debt. However, it was no deal of substance and €25bn of the Anglo debt remains. The Irish Central Bank is in the process of converting it into national debt. Further revelations emerged

in 2013 about Anglo Bankers in the Anglo Tapes adding to people's growing sense of injustice.

What is clear from this short overview is that the water charges protests didn't suddenly emerge out of nowhere. They were building upon a small layer of newly emerging community activism from 2010 onwards but were building upon a small, but growing layer of newly emerging community activism and Left political parties that had been growing slowly since 2010.

For example, of the respondents in the research, of those who stated that they had protested before, the most referenced was protests against austerity and cuts in areas such as the water and household/property taxes, cuts to the community sector, public sector cuts, lone parents, student fees, Special Needs Assistants, medical card, the health service, and cuts to local hospitals. Respondents also protested against the bank bailout and the bank debt. Another major issue that respondents had protested over was the issue of reproductive choice, Savita Halappanavar, women's right to choose, repeal the 8th Amendment, and abortion rights. Anti-war protests were also significant. Therefore, we can see that grassroots campaigns had been building and learning from each of these struggles which were then brought into the water campaign.

It is within this context that the Irish water movement burst on to the Irish (and international) political stage. It cannot be over emphasised the historical, social and political importance and significance of this movement on many levels both for Irish society and Irish politics and internationally for social movements and democratic politics. In regard to Ireland it is correct to state that this is one of the largest and broadest, and most sustained, social movement in Ireland since independence in 1921. At a local level communities have been engaging in protests against the installation of water metres for well over a year. At a national level there have been five demonstrations that have drawn between 20,000 and 150,000. To put this in a comparative context, a demonstration of 100,000 in Dublin would be equivalent to a million people protesting in Madrid.

Water charges were introduced in 2014 as part of fulfilment of the Troika bailout conditions. The Memorandum of Understanding between the Fianna Fail-led government and the EU/IMF/ECB (the 'Troika') in 2010 included the introduction of household water charges "with a view to start charging by the end of the EU-IMF programme period" and the setting up of a 'national public utility setting and providing for the establishment of Irish Water in its final form'. This new public utility, Irish Water, was to take responsibility for all water and waste-water provision away from local authorities. In April 2012, the new government announced that Irish Water, water charges and meters would be introduced in 2014.

In May 2014 the Minister for Environment, Phil Hogan, announced that the average household would pay €240 per year in water charges and said that those who didn't pay would be faced with reduced water pressure. At a grassroots community level, particularly in the large cities of Dublin and Cork but also in smaller regional towns protests had been growing since the start of

2014 blocking the installation of water meters with some areas effectively stopping installation. In particular, the ‘Dublin Says No’ and other groups in Dublin stopped meter installations. Hundreds of social media groups also began to emerge – with activists organising local meetings, and arranging to block off access to streets, as contractors arrived. Increasingly protests took place at the visit of senior politicians to various local events. Wider public disquiet grew when controversy arose in relation to the spending of up to €180 million on private consultants to set up Irish Water, the allocation of the contract to implement water meters to a company belonging to Ireland’s billionaire oligarch and political party funder, Denis O’Brien, and the requirement of people to provide their personal tax and welfare identification details to the new utility. The issue of the potential privatisation of Irish water was also raised as one of the principal concerns.

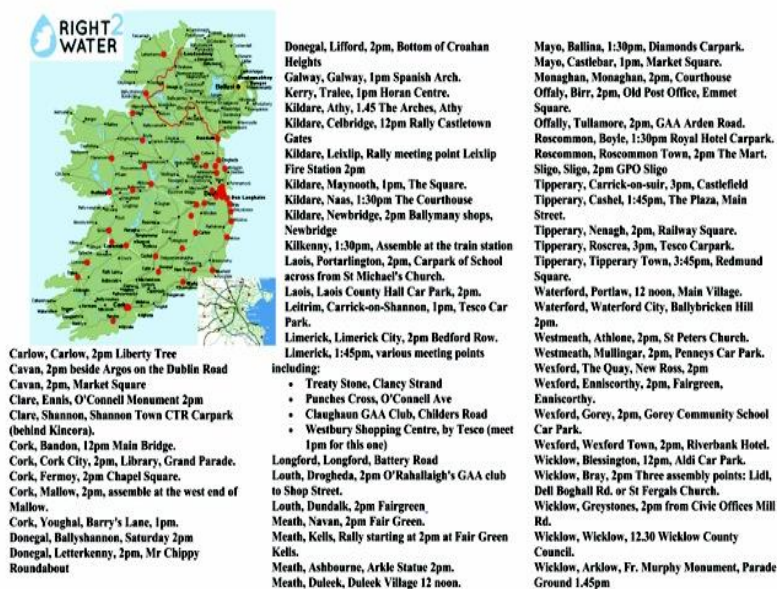
As public opposition to water charges grew the “Right2Water” campaign was formed in September 2014 as “a public campaign by activists, citizens, community groups, political parties/individuals and trade unionists who are calling for the Government to recognise and legislate for access to water as a human right” and to “abolish the planned introduction of water charges”. Right2Water involves a number of small trade unions (Unite, Mandate, the Communications Worker’s Union, the CPSU and OPATSI), as well as the Left parties of Sinn Féin and the united front organisations of two Trotskyist parties (People Before Profit and the Anti Austerity Alliance), and the Workers’ Party. The campaign is also supported by a range of community groups and individual activists. Right2Water started with a petition which aimed to collect 50,000 signatures before the October 2014 budget. Within one week of the Right2Water online petition being launched, over 35,000 people had signed it asking the Irish Government to abolish domestic water charges and respect the people’s ‘human right to water’.

The first national Right2Water protest took place in Dublin on October 11th 2014. The massive turnout surprised organisers and most political commentators when between 80,000 and 100,000 attended the protest. The same day, an Anti-Austerity Alliance candidate who had run a focused anti-water charges campaign – won a seat in parliament in a by-election. Sinn Féin was expected to win the seat but their decision not to support non-payment of the water charge and a lack of focus on the water charge issue was deemed as the reason they did not win the seat. By the first deadline of October 21st only a third (500,000) of the 1.5 million liable households on the public water network who would be customers of Irish Water had registered their details with Irish Water, forcing it to seek permission from the regulator to extend the registration deadline to November 29th. Then on November 1st the largest local level, cross-country, protest in recent Irish history took place. **Over 100 local Right2Water protests took place around Ireland** with well over 150,000 people participating despite horrendous weather conditions.

Figure 1 November protests around Dublin. Source: Indymedia.ie



Figure 2 November 1st protests across Ireland. Source: Indymedia.ie



*Figure 3 Images from November 1st protests across Ireland:
Wexford, Swords, Sligo. Source: Indymedia.ie*



In the weeks following this protest there was increasing focus by the media on a small number of more 'direct action' or 'civil-disobedience' type protests. The protest against the new Labour Party Leader and deputy prime minister, Joan Burton, in Tallaght in November 2014 received a hysterical media response and was seized on by government spokespeople to try portray the protestors as 'sinister dissidents'.

The government undertook a significant u-turn on November 19th and stated that the water charges were to be reduced, with two flat rates introduced – to be in place until the end of 2018. This included capping the charge at €160 for a single adult household and €260 for all other households until 2018. The fees were to be subsidised with a water conservation grant of €100 per year for eligible households, leaving the net cost per year at €60 for a single adult and €160 for other households. The grant would also be paid to those on group water schemes who are not customers of Irish Water. Furthermore, in an attempt to address concerns about privatisation the government introduced legislation that a 'plebiscite' would have to be held if a government planned to privatise Irish Water.

Despite the government reduction in charges the next Right2Water demonstration, which took place at 1pm on December 10th, a mid-week working day, in Dublin, attracted a crowd of around 30,000. The media focused on the actions of a small group of demonstrators who blocked traffic in O Connell Street. The Right 2 Water campaign highlighted the plight of the residents of Detroit in the US as the future for Ireland unless the charges were stopped. They brought over activists from the Detroit Water Brigade who addressed local meetings and the protests. The campaign pointed out that "the commodification of water has already plunged thousands of Detroit families into water poverty, while countless Irish households will face the threat of water poverty unless domestic water charges are abolished". It also countered that in fact a referendum was still required to guarantee the public ownership of water as any government could change the existing legislation without having 'to go to the people' for consent.

On December 13th an Irish Times opinion poll showed that 33% of respondents stated they would not pay the water charges, 10% were undecided and less than half, 48% said they would be paying. In Dublin 39% stated they would not be paying the charges. While in terms of class, 69% of the highest socio-economic group stated they would be paying the charges while only 35% of the lowest socio economic group said they would be paying.

Significantly, protests organised a few days later by local 'Says No' Groups in Dublin, Cork and other places and the newly formed Communities Against Water Charges, built mainly through local community activists on Facebook, attracted 30,000 to the Dublin protest, with another 20,000 marching across the country.

By Jan 15th 760,500 of the 1.5 million liable households had registered. By February 2nd, the next deadline for registration, 850,000 homes had provided

their details to Irish Water out of the estimated 1.5 million customers who will receive their first water bills in April 2015. The deadline for registration was then extended to June 2015. About 35,000 households returned their registration packages with no details.

In February 2015 the Gardai arrested 20 protestors involved in the Tallaght protests against the Tanaiste. There was accusations of 'political policing' as an attempt to try break and divide the movement. Local activists claimed the Gardaí were "terrorising" the community and questioned why groups of up to ten officers were turning up to make the early-morning arrests. Protestors also reported violent tactics by the Gardai at local water meter installation protests with numerous 'you tube' videos showing this to be the case. The jailing of four water protesters for breaking a court injunction on staying a certain distance away from water meter installations, lead to further large scale protests. The protesters were sentenced to between 28 and 56 days in prison – however they were all freed early after two and half weeks in prison after a surprise ruling from President of the High Court Nicholas Kearns, who found there were a number of errors in their detention.

In February, an opinion poll carried out by Millward Brown for the Irish Independent showed that only 40% of respondents stated they would be paying the charge, 30% stated they would not be paying, 10% were undecided and 10% stated 'it depends'. By March 15th, at least a third of households liable for the water charges had not returned their registration forms. Irish Water claimed that registration had reached 990,000 households to make up 66% of their potential total customer base. While government Ministers tried to talk down and dismiss the water movement, 80,000 attended the Right2Water demonstration in Dublin on March 21st. A march organised by the Anti-Austerity Alliance on April 16th focused on non-payment of the water charges had 10,000 in attendance. In a sign of their fear of the growing support for non-payment the government is now discussing legislation that would enable water charges to be taken directly out of people's wages and social welfare.

Our research of over 2500 water protestors shows that the water movement is unlikely just to dissipate and is in the process of transforming Irish politics and society. It found that those protesting were motivated by a range of factors and not just water charges. People are protesting at the impacts of austerity (which was the most cited reason for protesting), a desire for complete abolition (and not just reduction) of water charges and against the privatisation of water. They are also motivated by the belief that the current (and previous) government have, through austerity and the bailout, put the interests of the banks, Europe, and the bondholders before the needs of the Irish people, and that the working, poor and middle income people have paid an unfair burden of austerity. Respondents identified 'corruption', 'cronyism' and a belief that the 'establishment parties look after a golden circle of wealthy business people and corporate elite' as reasons for public anger.

It also found that protestors believe that the water campaign will be successful and 92% stated that they do not intend paying for water charges. This indicates a high level of confidence among protestors that the water charges and Irish Water will be abolished. 90% felt the tactics of the Right2Water movement have been effective and is, therefore, very supportive of the Right2Water trade unions, political parties and grassroots 'Says No' groups. The holding together of the different political parties and various groups in the united campaign of Right2Water, despite differences over non-payment and civil disobedience, is very significant. It indicates the Right2Water trade unions and political parties understood the extent of the desire amongst the grassroots for a united, serious campaign and that in order to represent this sentiment they would have to work together despite their usual behaviour of working against each other. The trade unions and community groups involved (and in particular a few key individuals within these) have played an important role in ensuring that the media focus was on the issues in the campaign – particularly around the human right to water and against privatisation. They also played an important role in mediating differences between the various Left political parties and in ensuring the emphasis has been on building the campaign rather than political rivalries. The self-organisation of communities gave them a power and influence that meant political parties and unions could not just do their 'business as usual' either through typical one off marches or dominating the campaign with their own party interests.

Survey respondents believe the protests brought the water charges to the top of the political agenda and made the government "take stock and realise that the people of Ireland have had enough" and that "they are not taking this one lying down". They explained, how "Mass mobilisation has resulted in the political classes starting to get the message; resistance of meter installation has shown people that civil disobedience is equally or more important than street protests, and can work". While others stated "Yes they have been effective and it is a building process. Right2Water can help build people's confidence and let them find a voice that has never been used, the voice of protest the voice that tells the government that enough is enough and they shall take no more from us to pay bankers and bond holders"

Protestors intend to extend the campaign to boycotting the water charge. Furthermore, a majority of respondents (54.4%) stated that they had not participated in any previous protest indicating that this is a new form of citizen's action and empowerment. Respondents felt the water protests have been successful because it "is a genuinely grassroots and local movement and has mobilised every village, town and city of this country" and "rallied Irish people from all walks of life". The respondents explained that, in their view, they have the power to stop the implementation of the water charges through large scale protest, non-payment and protest at water meter installations. This is different from other austerity measures such as the household charge where people did not have the same power to protest as it was enforced by revenue or cuts were made directly to wages and public services. Respondents explained, "The

government are worried they have made some changes, it has awoken the Irish people to the unjust way this country is governed”, while another said, “We have empowered people with knowledge. Knowledge of how corrupt our government is. The mass protest movements have already seen impacts through the government reducing the charges, capping them for four years etc. But they have to be abolished. I want a fair society for all not just the rich”. Another respondent similarly stated, “They have galvanised the anger which already existed against austerity and the Water Tax from ordinary people, the silent majority if you like. This has already ensured several u-turns on Water Tax issues from the scumbags in government. There is a growing sense of empowerment amongst the man and woman in the street.”

Very significantly, 45% said they voted for the main large parties (FF/FG/Labour) in 2011 but indicated that they are changing their vote to the opposition Left parties and independents in the forthcoming election. 31.7% said they will vote for the People Before Profit and Anti-Austerity Alliance, 27.5% said for Left Independents, 23.9% for Sinn Fein and only 5.6% for ‘Right’ Independents. 77% of respondents said that they believed the most effective way of getting change was through protesting while only 28% saw contacting a political representative as effective. Respondents explained, “In the last election and the next election my decisions are increasingly based on who's left to vote for. In both cases the main parties of this country have left me little choice but to not vote for them. To be honest, one is left very disillusioned by the whole thing. Independents are all that's left unless one chooses to not vote at all. And both of those choices are not particularly healthy for the country either, but no way are Fine Gael or Labour getting my vote, and I'll likely never vote for Fianna Fail again after the shambles they left this country with for decades to come. My grandchildren will be bearing the ill effects of that government and it saddens me”, while another said “Our political system is broken, our politicians and political parties are owned by corporate elites who act in their favour. I'm not standing for it anymore. I want a government for the people”. Despite the strong support for ‘Left’ parties, a large proportion (79%) want to see a new political party formed. They identified that the issues such a new party should stand on include anti-austerity; anti-corruption, anti-cronyism; radical political reform and democracy. They want it to stand for fairness, equality, social justice, and the right to housing, health, water, education and protection of the poor and vulnerable. It should also stand up to Europe (particularly on the debt), and ‘take back’ Irish natural resources (gas, fisheries etc) ‘for the people of Ireland’.

At the grassroots level in communities protests are continuing against the installation of water meters but these are facing increasingly violent police repression. Other grassroots actions are also taking place around homelessness, repossessions and cuts to welfare payments of lone parents while strikes have recently taken place over precariousness and plans to privatise transport. However, the connections between these newly emerging movements are weak and require strengthening to continue the process of citizen mobilisation and empowerment and build solidarity across society. With a general election likely

to take place in the next 10 months the Right 2Water unions have started of process of trying to develop a common policy programme amongst the various constituent parts of the water movement that could form the basis for a potential alternative Progressive Government, that would for the first time in Ireland see a Left-led government. Other new citizen's initiatives are exploring the possibility of creating a new Podemos-type political movement that would try to create a new way of doing politics based on citizen and communities leading the new political movement and standing candidates in the coming election.

There are significant challenges to all of this, not least the difficulty of achieving broad unity amongst diverse political groupings in a traditionally sectarian context with recent failures due to far Left in-fighting and disrespectful political approaches, but there is some ground for optimism that the water movement and grassroots citizens action is forcing a change that could lead to real political transformation in Ireland.

This action note summarises key aspects of the research report "The Irish water war, austerity and the 'Risen people'", available at https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/sites/default/files/assets/document/TheIrishWaterwar_o.pdf

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