

Fighting for a Nurses victory

One of the most useful things in any struggle is recollection. In fact one of the main justifications for organising in a socialist group is to act as a collective memory for the working class. Applied to the nurses struggle we ask: When did we fight a similar struggle? What was the outcome? Did we win or lose? What were the strengths and weaknesses of the campaign?

The last battle is not so long ago, when the teachers union ASTI took industrial action to secure equal pay for new entrants to the teaching force. As today the strike was solid. There was widespread sympathy for what was seen as a fight against a basic injustice. Leftists mobilised in support. Yet the teachers were defeated.

The strike took place in the context of a public sector pay deal which the government used as a pair of handcuffs to rule out a settlement. As today this arrangement had the full-throated support of the other union leaders and was jointly policed by government and themselves. It included penalty clauses that could deny pay and promotion to strikers. Not only that, the ASTI leadership were unwilling to take on the overall agreement and were looking for special status within it, in line with the garda deal. The government expressed a willingness to find small change for some extra allowances and the TUI and INTO pressured ASTI into talks and into defeat!

All these factors apply today. The Public Service Stability Agreement (PSSA) policed by a number of committees staffed by unions and government enforce current pay deals. A subcommittee recently agreed that there are no grounds for offering substantial pay awards to the nurses. As with ASTI, the nurses and midwives seek an exception within the deal, rather than an overall challenge. The pay committee has left wriggle room in the form of a small sum for allowances, but accepting these would spell overall defeat. However we are not doomed to repeat the past! There is a mood of determination among the nurses and midwives, and they plan to broaden and extend strike action. There is even stronger support for the nurses than for the teachers and the nurses plan demonstrations to bring their supporters onto the streets.

Scabbing by SIPTU and other public sector union leaders has become so explicit in this dispute, with calls being issued for members to cross picket lines, that it is no longer being diplomatically ignored and they are feeling the pressure. Overall the ICTU partnership model is only sustainable by suppressing fair wage demands by their members. ICTU, SIPTU, FORSA and other union leaders support pay restraint because they believe capitalist recovery will lead to recovery for the worker ... but the recovery has been achieved at the expense of workers!

Limited pay restoration is part of a strategy to lower overall public sector wage costs which leaves many in poverty and the sell-off of housing to vulture funds coupled to the refusal to build public housing is resulting in rocketing housing costs which is leading to desperation and homelessness. We should not hold back. We need to build an overwhelming force of solidarity - **not solidarity in the sense of sympathy, but solidarity in terms of common needs, common purpose and common action.**

Those common needs are: For a full restoration of public sector pay. For a comprehensive National Health Service, excluding private firms. For a national programme of public housing.

We need unity: A united mobilisation of health workers and Health Service users; Unity of workers across all unions, no crossing of picket lines - and most importantly a general strike of public sector workers that finally breaks free of the dead hand of the Public Sector Stability Pact which is a contract for workers' poverty.

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