

Refusing to pay for the crisis

The governments of Greece and the Irish Republic are continuing to impose savage austerity measures on working and middle class people to pay for the capitalist crisis. Part of these measures includes the imposition of additional household taxes. As the articles below report, these taxes have provoked a fightback by ordinary people and the trade unions echoing the 'can't pay, won't pay' tactic used in the battle to defeat the Tory poll tax in Britain in the early 1990s.



photo Paul Mattsson

Greece: Non-payment movement against new housing tax

Christina Ziakka
Xekinima (CWI in Greece)

In October 2011 the Greek Pasok government of George Papandreou (just before being forced out of office), announced the implementation of a new housing tax through people's electricity bills. It will cost already hard pressed Greek workers hundreds of euros a year.

Those who did not pay the tax within 40 days would have their electricity supply cut in the middle of winter. Yet even before the new tax, according to the Electricity Company (DEI), 320,000 households could not afford to pay their electricity bills!

The only exemptions to this new tax are the unemployed in receipt of unemployment benefit (ie 183,000 out of total of about one million, officially, as unemployment benefit is only handed out for the first 12 months) and disabled people if their disability is over 80%!

Public anger forced a number of mayors and local governments to take initiatives.

The mayor of Nea Ionia in Athens, who is an independent left (supported by Syriza and other sections of the left, like Xekinima, in the last elections) called on citizens to refuse to pay the tax. He organised legal assistance and stated that the electricians who worked for the council would reconnect the electricity supply if it was cut by DEI.

Currently more than 50 municipalities nationwide have taken decisions to support those who will not pay the tax.

Initiatives

The (public sector) Electricity Company Workers Union responded with an open call to all the technicians of the company to refuse to cut the power at workers' houses.

And for over a week, at the end of November 2011, they occupied the central office of the company responsible for billing and power cuts.

Even the Union of the Technicians of private companies stated publicly that they will not cut the power to any household, if asked to do the "dirty" job that the public electricians refused to do.

Dozens of other unions urged

their members to actively support the movement against the housing tax.

Hand in hand with these developments are many initiatives of people to build the movement. In some areas we had the reactivation of the 'local assemblies' that initially appeared during the movement of the "Enraged" in the summer.

Though the assemblies, or the "can't pay, won't pay" committees that have been reactivated are small, attracting mainly left activists, a common feature is the big response of people to the open meetings called by the local assemblies etc.

There have also been a number of occupations of DEI branches, the formation of teams of volunteer electricians and collective attempts of local people to take legal action against the tax.

These developments have put a lot of pressure on the government and forced them to announce some concessions: the freezing of any electricity supply cuts for a while and the exemption from the tax of people with "proven inability to pay".

However, these concessions are, in reality, a smokescreen. The government will go all the way - cutting the electricity supply of households and sending people to court - in order to collect the tax.

Not only because they expect to get €2.9 billion from this tax during 2012 (the 'Troika' ie the EU, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund, demanded daily updates on the progress of the collection of the tax) but, also, because if the government fails to enforce the tax, then this will raise the confidence of the movement to overthrow the austerity policies and the government itself.

The government and the state mechanisms can succeed against individuals. But what can they do if 500,000 or one million households refuse to pay?

Xekinima is heavily involved in this campaign and argues for the need to build committees in neighbourhood and local community, to organise meetings and committees to defend every single household. The campaign must be linked to the other working class struggles and social movements, to get rid of the hated Greek government and kick out the Troika once and for all.

Irish 'poll tax' battle has begun

Cian Prendiville
Socialist Party (CWI, Ireland)

A massive campaign against a new 'Household Charge' has begun in Ireland. The new flat tax affects 1.6 million households across the country, including the overwhelming majority of ordinary workers. However, a mass campaign of non-payment, launched by the Socialist Party and others, is getting a huge response.

The new tax came in on 1 January, and requires people to self-register and set up payment before 31 March. However, following a call from the Campaign Against the Household and Water Taxes, a wide layer of TDs (MPs), celebrities, and ordinary people have come out and declared that they will not pay it.

Over 100 public meetings have been organised across Ireland, launching local branches of the campaign. Opinion polls have shown the vast majority are opposed to this tax, and say they will refuse to pay.

Despite government propaganda about it being a 'charge' for community services, everybody knows where the money is really going: to the bankers and speculators the state is bailing out.

This will be made even clearer on 25 January when the Irish govern-

ment plans to hand over €1.25 billion, eight years' worth of the new tax, in repaying someone who gambled on one of Ireland's most reckless banks.

This new tax will rise and rise if they get it in. While it is starting at €100, it is meant to pave the way for a full home tax and water charges in the next years, taking another €1,000+ a year out of the pockets of ordinary people who already pay the vast bulk of taxes.

Campaign

Over the next weeks and months a momentous battle will develop across Ireland, bigger than anything in recent history.

The campaign will take the fight around the country; organising mass rallies, mass distributing leaflets, car stickers and window posters calling for non payment and non-registration, and knocking on doors to sign people up to the campaign.

We aim to have organised and established mass non-payment by the middle of March and then be in a position to break the government 'deadline' of 31 March.

Such mass non-registration, and an organised and sustained campaign of non-payment, can make the tax unworkable and force the government, and their bosses in the EU/IMF into retreat.

The Poll Tax: Thatcher's downfall

The hated Poll Tax (or Community Charge) was the Tory Thatcher government's replacement for household domestic rates. Introduced first in Scotland in 1989 and then a year later in England and Wales, it was a socially incendiary piece of legislation.

Instead of a household charge every individual over 18 years was liable to pay it. It meant that a millionaire living in a mansion would pay less than two adults living in a council flat. Effectively the Poll Tax was a massive shift in wealth from the poorest to the wealthiest.

Militant supporters, the forerunners of the Socialist Party, played a key role in organising opposition to the tax. Militant's tactic was based on defying the law through a mass non-payment campaign with the slogan: 'Can't pay, won't pay'.

Anti-poll tax meetings were held in every city, town and even in villages. Streets and neighbourhoods organised anti-poll tax unions and, through the work of Militant socialists, were combined into town, borough, and regional federations,

and an all-Britain anti-Poll Tax Federation. These federations gelled together the non-payment campaigns into a massive 17 million strong movement.

Despite the extensive use of the courts by local authorities to sequester payments from individuals and the jailing of non-payers (many of whom were Militant supporters), the tax became largely uncollectable and thereby unworkable.

Moreover, the anti-Poll Tax movement galvanised political opposition to the anti-working class Thatcher government. The 'Iron Lady', who had hailed the Poll Tax as her flagship legislation, was now badly corroded. So much so that the Tory Party grandees were forced to remove her as party leader. Thatcher resigned in November 1990 after failing to secure sufficient backing from Tory MPs in a leadership contest and the Poll Tax was replaced by the council tax.

For further reading see The Rise of Militant by Peter Taaffe, available from Socialist Books, £9.99

The Committee for a Workers' International

The Committee for a Workers' International (CWI) is the socialist international organisation to which the Socialist Party is affiliated.

The CWI is organised in 45 countries and works to unite the working class and oppressed peoples against global capitalism and to fight for a socialist world.

For more details including CWI publications write to: CWI, PO Box 3688, London E11 1YE. email cwi@worldsoc.co.uk

www.socialistworld.net

The CWI website contains news, reports and analysis from around the world.

Nigeria: Fuel strike suspended



Nigeria's trade union leaders called off the unions' week-long general strike after the government agreed to partially reinstate the cancelled fuel subsidy.

Since the strike began on 9 January thousands of angry Nigerians have taken to the streets, defying police violence, to protest against the anti-poor and neoliberal policies of president Goodluck Jonathan's government.

What has incensed many Nigerians is seeing the enormous wealth from the country's oil export revenues being siphoned off by corrupt officials while the price of fuel has soared.

The removal of the fuel subsidy on 1 January - demanded by the International Monetary Fund - saw the price of petrol rocket from 65naira (26p) a litre to 140naira. The partial reinstatement of subsidies will bring the price down to 97naira.

The rise in the petrol pump prices has also led to an increase in the price of food and other goods because of higher transportation costs. Given the economic hardships that the majority of Nigerians already suffer - mass unemployment, widespread absolute poverty, etc - the fuel increase was 'the straw that broke the camel's back'.

The government argues that the cost of the subsidy would be better spent on infrastructure and on improving public services but few believe this will happen.

Given the widespread support for the week-long strike many Nigerians will be angered by the union leaders precipitately ending the action. Even before announcing the end of the strike the labour leaders had called for an end to street protests and demonstrations citing 'the country's security problems' as an excuse.