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Reflections on the May 1 conference called by the R2W unions.

I welcomed the conference organized by the six R2W unions on May 1, but I was disappointed by its abstention from what is actually happening in Ireland today. This conference would not have taken place but for the movement against the water charge, which is now at a crucial phase. People are getting bills and deciding what to do. If a significant majority pay, it will be a serious setback. So I think there is a need for public calls by known leaders for non-payment as the way to ensure the defeat of the charge. Yet in four hours of a meeting there was no mention of this actual living struggle – other than reference to the centrality that mass non-payment had in the struggle against water privatization in the North.

There was much talk of new political movements elsewhere. But nobody has been able to explain to me where a new political movement in Ireland will emerge from – or who will initially populate any new movement – other than amongst those who are prepared to fight now. The conference was supposed to be the start of a discussion on a political platform for the coming general election. But there was no indication that candidates would be asked to say they support non-payment – in support of those who are now challenging austerity by refusing to pay. Why would those actually fighting austerity get involved in supporting new candidates who don't champion non-payment? And why should the movement wait passively to vote for a future government to abolish the charge – when such a government might not be elected? Surely part of the purpose in standing for election is to champion the existing mass movement and build out from it – not use it for electoral purposes while abstaining on its key slogan: don't pay.

Speakers said we need to involve people in a real way – and I agree. To me that means, first of all, giving all those who are active in struggles the opportunity to decide the policies of any new political movement that's supposedly going to fight for their interests. So it's disappointing that there was no mention of proposals I and others have made (<http://www.irishleftreview.org>) to involve the majority of the participants in the water charge campaign and broader anti-austerity movement in the decision-making of these conferences. The proposal in the Policy Principles document we were given at the very end of the meeting does not promote democratic participation. It invites individual submissions, rather than proposing a big conference where people who are selected as representatives from across the actual movement can participate, hear various points of view and decide on points of principle. (<https://www.facebook.com/Right2WaterIreland>)

We were told that a committee of four (Kathleen Lynch, John Bissett, Steve Nolan, Michael Taft) will take submissions regarding the Policy Principles document. But it is not clear if these four people will decide upon which submissions should go into the document, or if the meeting on June 13 will decide. Nor is it clear who will be invited to the meeting on June 13 – the 200 present on May 1 or a broader range of representatives, selected by the movement itself; nor whether people will get to see the submissions of others before the meeting on June 13, or have to decide upon them on the day, or be presented with a take-it-or-leave-it document written by these four people and/or un-named others.

Facilitating broad participation in the current circumstances of a fragmented movement is not straightforward: should people be delegated, by what proportions, etc. But it was very disturbing that an attempt by Ruth Coppinger to ask about how we are to promote participation – perhaps the most important issue after we had sat through four hours of presentations but no discussion – was shouted down by some of those present at the conference; and that this behaviour was not challenged by the chair.

Finally, there are many issues that could be included in an election platform. But it is disturbing that the document of Policy Principles we were given, that is intended to be the basis for a public discussion in the water charge movement, does not mention coalition with the parties of the right. Can any progressive, democratic political movement be built upon a willingness to go into coalition with FF or FG? Likewise repeal of the 8th Amendment is not mentioned – a matter of interest to half the population and one that has majority popular support.

The absence of these points may reflect differing views amongst the leaderships of the six unions, SF or whoever from R2W the un-named authors of this Policy Principles document may be. But if a desire amongst them to get a different government includes a willingness to accept a coalition with FF, which SF appear willing to do, this new initiative will go the way of Labour and also help revive FF.

Coalition with FF or FG would be disastrous for any political movement that wants real change: neither party of the right will accept any real encroachment on the interests of the Irish rich or big business, and coalition with them involves capitulation to what our wealthy enemies will accept – as Labour has done.

Calls for electoral unity amongst all involved in R2W – when such calls do not openly declare opposition to coalition with FF, FG or Labour – are calls for a unity that covers over the willingness of some to do deals with these parties and accept the rules that protect the wealth and privilege of the minority. Openly rejecting coalition with FF, FG or Labour is the starting principle in any discussion about a unity that is committed to a real alternative to the politics of austerity and oppression in Ireland today.

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