

Covid-19: Ireland flattens the curve, but socialist policies needed

Tuesday 28 April 2020, by [CHEALLAIGH Jessy Ní](#), [No Borders News](#) (Date first published: 20 April 2020).

The Republic of Ireland has succeeded in “flattening the curve” of the coronavirus’ spread in relative terms over the last six week. [1] The death toll is roughly on par with Denmark, far less than devastating hotspots in Western Europe. Although the Irish Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Leo Varadkar has received the lion’s share of international praise, health care workers, trade unions, social movements, and the socialist left have had to push every step of the way. And as unemployment in Ireland races towards 20 percent, the question of who will pay for the crisis is looming large. [2]

No Borders News: Please describe the state of the pandemic in your country or city. How many people are infected? How many have died? What do experts expect in the coming weeks in terms of how fast the contagion will spread.

Jessy Ní Cheallaigh: As of April 20, the total number of confirmed cases in the Republic of Ireland is 15,251 and the Covid-19 death toll has reached 610, including more than 200 hundred more deaths in the last week. [3] In Northern Ireland, 2,645 cases have been registered and 194 people have died from Covid-19. [4] This means there are 17,896 confirmed cases on the island with a death toll of 804. Overall, Ireland has made a decent effort to flatten the curve as the spread is not as rapid as it is in other countries. The government announced that there has been a “very high level of compliance” with restrictions on non-essential travel over the Easter bank holiday weekend. However, there is still concern amongst experts over the “clusters” of the virus present in nursing homes around the country where very few healthy/qualified staff are working to help prevent spread.

As of Saturday 11 April, there have been 6.5 deaths per 100,000 people in Ireland. These figures however are definitely not 100 percent accurate as there have been problems with testing owing to the lack of available testing kits as well as a huge backlog in test results that have yet to be processed. When testing was first opened up it was under the understanding that anyone who suspected they had the virus could be tested, when large numbers of test were coming back negative they changed it so that the only people who were referred for testing were those who had two or more of the most common symptoms of the virus or those who were high at risk such as immuno-compromised, underlying conditions etc. This resulted in over 40,000 people being taken off the waiting list who then had to reapply. Lots of reports state that some of these people still haven’t received results and that was just under a month ago.

NBN: What practical measures has your national government taken to respond to the crisis? Have they acted responsibly or were they unprepared? Briefly describe measures your government is taking now to contain the virus and treat people infected with Covid-19. Is there a state of emergency, are schools closed, etc.?

JNC: Currently the Republic of Ireland is in lockdown with restrictions on travel. At the start of the

crisis the government was hesitant to act. Currently, there is a coalition caretaker government, led by the center-right Fine Gael party because a new government has not yet been formed since the last General Election on Feb 8, 2020. On March 3, despite the fact that 3 coronavirus cases had been confirmed, it was planned for the St. Patrick's Day Parade to still go ahead because there is big focus on the tourism industry and the impact it has on the economy. However, events developed rapidly and 3 days later (March 9) all parades were canceled as confirmed cases rose to 24. On March 12, it was announced that all schools, colleges, and childcare facilities would close until March 29. Indoor gatherings of more than 100 people and outdoor gatherings of 500 were banned on this day as well. On March 15, the government asked all pubs and bars to close and strongly advised against house parties as cases climbed to 169 along with the first 2 deaths. On Friday March 27, a full lockdown was announced to last for 2 weeks - until Sunday April 12. The announcement stated that everybody in Ireland was being asked to stay inside their homes in all circumstances with the exception of the following purposes:

- Travel to and from work only when the work is an essential service and can't be done from home
- To shop for groceries/medicine
- Vital family reasons
- Visiting those who require care
- 1 daily outing for exercise that can't exceed 2km radius from home

The following groups of workers were deemed essential under these restrictions:

- Healthcare and social care
- Public and civil service
- Utilities
- Necessary goods, foods and medicines
- Financial services
- Transport
- Communications, including journalists

This lockdown period was renewed to last a further 3 weeks on Friday April 10 with the new set date being May 5.

The restrictions in place now are necessary but as I said, there was a delay in implementing all of them at first. The government's hesitation in the face of clear danger showed the priority it places in profits over lives. RISE called for the closure of all non-essential workplaces before the government announced such measures. We also called for sufficient PPE (Personal Protective Equipment) to be provided for workers, a necessity that still has not fully been provided. A hospital in the rural county of Cavan for example is the worst off in the country currently as the majority of workers and health providers in the hospital have contracted the virus due to a lack of PPE.

NBN: How has your health care system responded to the crisis? What are your health care system's greatest weaknesses? What are its greatest strengths?

JNC: Ireland's healthcare system was in a weak position going into this crisis, moving towards greater privatisation and private insurance-based healthcare. Due to years of underfunding there has been a trolley crisis in the hospitals for years with a record numbers of patients stuck on trolleys (or gurneys) in hallways due to a lack of beds being announced every few months. There have been numerous cases of patients dying because they were left on a trolley and did not get a bed in time. We have one of the lowest numbers of ICU beds per 1,000 people in all of Europe.

There is also a crisis present due to the lack of healthcare workers in this country, especially nurses. Due to low wages, a large number of trained nurses have emigrated in search of a better quality of life, currently most hospitals around the country are understaffed as a result. INMO (the nurses and midwife union in Ireland) called for strike action in February last year due to the understaffing, underfunding, and lack of safe staffing in hospitals. 95 percent of workers voted to strike and 40,000 went on strike for 3 days. The INMO leadership called off the second round of 3-day strike action after a weak deal was agreed on pay rises for some but not all staff, a decision which was praised by Fine Gael ministers at the time.

NBN: Describe the official political response to Covid-19 in your country from the far-right and conservative parties, to liberal and social democrat parties, and the parties of the left if applicable.

JNC: The far right does not have a strong presence in Ireland, especially not electorally, but amongst the unorganised layers of the far right in Ireland the main focus has been put on both Chinese racism and the need to harden borders. Additionally, there has been more wide-spread hysteria over 5G wifi services that are being introduced with certain far right commentators spreading conspiracies that these 5G masts are the cause of the coronavirus. This is mostly dismissed as a wild conspiracy however there was an arson attack on one of the 5G masts in the county of Donegal last week which shows that this conspiracy has gained some traction.

The conservative parties Fine Gael (FG) and Fianna Fáil (FF) have had similar reactions to the pandemic - so much so that it was announced this week that they are prepared to form a "stable" coalition after years of being in opposition to each other (although their policies have no major differences) and weeks of vehemently denying that it would be a possibility. Even though the most recent election was an unprecedented break from the 100-year-old two-party system, with Sinn Féin (a center-left, nationalist party) making huge gains and the result being a three-way tie between these 3 parties, FF and FG are pushing to keep the power, sharing it for the first time. [5] Interestingly however, the language used by FG as it deals with the crisis has made a massive swing to the left, with words like "solidarity" being used in public addresses and, of course, praise for key sections of "essential" workers.

FG's approval rate has gone up in recent weeks as Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Leo Varadkar (who is a licensed medical doctor) pulls various PR stunts, such as returning to work on the frontline doing contact tracing calls one day a week. Sinn Féin and other liberal, capitalist, centre/centre left parties such as the Greens, Social Democrats, and Labour have not played a huge role in the crisis so far and have not provided many concrete opposition proposals to the FG-FF government so far. Sinn Féin being the most vocal out of all of them. The Green leader, Eamon Ryan, actually suggested that we should all start to grow vegetables at home in case that the chain of production collapses.

The left-wing parties - [Solidarity](#), [People Before Profit](#), and ourselves in [RISE](#) - have been making calls for workers' welfare throughout the pandemic with a lot of our demands being taken up by FG days or weeks after we've made them. These include a demand we made early on for the shutting down of non-essential workplaces and building sites as well as demanding full pay for workers, including the student nurses who were recruited to the front lines for the duration of the pandemic.

We have also raised demands in favour of price controls to tackle the price gouging that has started to appear by certain businesses on essential products such as hand sanitizer and face masks. RISE's public representative, Paul Murphy TD (Teachtaí Dála in the Irish language, a member of Ireland's parliament, the Dáil Éireann) put out a call for people to submit examples of this price gouging when they come across it. We received hundreds of messages and we publicised them, naming and shaming the companies responsible. These posts have resulted in a lot of these ridiculously high prices being lowered back down. There has also been a lot of focus put on the aftermath of the pandemic: Who's going to pay for it? The oncoming recession. We can't go "back to normal" etc.

NBN:How have trade unions responded to the crisis? Especially public sector, education, and health care unions?

JNC: Trade Unions in Ireland have a history of being quite bureaucratic and with less than genuine leadership, however, they have been making demands during the pandemic. [The Irish Congress of Trade Unions](#) (ICTU) have played a really weak and detrimental role so far. They have not led the way calling for non-essential workplaces to shut down, nor for full pay for workers. The main demand on their website is for "workers to wash hands with care." The trade unions have a huge opportunity in front of them to unionise massive numbers of essential workers in low-wage industries with historically poor working conditions, but we've yet to see any efforts to do this.

The [Irish Nurses and Midwives Organization's](#) (INMO) main demands have been for healthcare staff to receive regular and detailed updates as they occur, to ensure all staff have necessary PPE and safe working conditions and that pay for healthcare workers is maintained or improved during the crisis. Student nurses were asked to come to work prior to receiving their qualifications due to lack of staff and many are still not being paid currently although INMO made a demand that this be rectified and was agreed by FG, workers are reporting that payment is on the way but still hasn't come through.

[UNITE](#) made a call for all construction sites in the country to be closed when the lockdown was first introduced and construction workers were classified as necessary at first.

[FÓRSA](#) (union covering workers across the civil, public, private, voluntary, and semi-state sectors) has made the following demands:

1. Volunteers should be sought for higher-risk tasks and work areas wherever possible;
2. For the protection of patients, clients, the public and workers themselves, staff must have the training and qualifications required to undertake their allocated tasks and functions safely and effectively;
3. Adequate personal protective equipment (PPE), and training in the use and disposal of PPE, should be provided, along with any other necessary supports (e.g., mental health support) that can reasonably be expected;
4. The individual family circumstances of staff should be taken into account when people are being allocated to higher-risk tasks and functions. In particular, those living with – or whose caring responsibilities demand contact with – elderly and other high-risk groups should not be obliged to work in high-risk areas except in very exceptional circumstances; and,
5. Wherever possible, such workers should also receive other practical supports from their employer, including childcare supports.

And [ASTI](#) (Ireland's main secondary level teachers union) has supported the controversial call by the government to reschedule the leaving certificate (end of school exams for second level students) for the end of the summer rather than cancelling it like other countries have done. They encourage teachers to continue online teaching throughout the summer.

NBN: How have social movements (student, feminist, ecological, immigrant, indigenous, etc.) responded to the crisis?

JNC: My impression has been that social movements have generally slowed down due to the crisis as traditional forms of face-to-face organising obviously isn't possible at the moment. However, some groups within different movements are doing a lot online during the pandemic. The most prominent environmentalist group in Ireland, Extinction Rebellion, are currently looking to put pressure on the Green Party leadership to not compromise on yearly emission reductions and no new fossil fuel infrastructure. The Greens were considering going into the coalition with FG and FF but it's looking like the younger and more radical membership are going to block this.

The movement for rights of asylum seekers and against the system of Direct Provision Centers that is currently in place for immigrants is playing a key role in highlighting the inhumane conditions that asylum seekers have to endure and how they are incompatible with the social distancing rules. [6] Currently, in Direct Provision Centers across the country, there may be up to 8 or 9 people to one room. The [Movement for Asylum Seekers in Ireland](#) (MASI) have been writing open letters to the government signed by hundreds of experts, raising awareness about the inhumane conditions that exist in the system.

There was an attempt to roll back abortion rights in Northern Ireland, that were won earlier in the year. [7] This stemmed from the lack of remote access to abortion pills that were accessible in the rest of the UK and in the Republic but for a few weeks were not available in the North. Petitions were shared by local pro-choice groups online and remote access was made available.

It's clear that without the prior existence of these movements and the dedicated work of these activists, these issues would in all likelihood not be addressed.

NBN: Are there any efforts to make demands for social justice, national health care, emergency economic measures for unemployment pay, stopping rent and debt payments, etc.?

JNC: Currently in RISE we are making many of these demands and are releasing regular articles and social media posts regarding them through RISE TD Paul Murphy's office to spread these demands. Other left wing parties such as the Socialist Party and People Before Profit are making similar demands.

NBN: How do you think the Covid-19 crisis will impact national politics in the coming weeks and months?

JNC: I think that a deep and long-lasting recession is on the cards as we entered this pandemic already at the breaking point of an economic crisis in the capitalist system. I've already outlined how the two big establishment parties, who received an historically low vote in the recent elections, are now scraping together a "stable" coalition government to carry us through the crisis. However, I predict that their incapability of offering real concrete relief to ordinary working-class people – when the effects of this pandemic become clear and their fake acts of "solidarity" have been seen as disingenuous – will reinforce the shift to the left in Ireland we have seen previously. It will hopefully grow stronger and the left can make real gains in terms of a rise in consciousness amongst working people.

At the same time, I do believe that there will be a period of real hardship and recession to struggle through before we can get to this point. One important difference between this crisis and the last in Ireland is the fact that the workers movement has 6 revolutionary socialist TDs – Paul Murphy

(RISE), Brid Smith (PBP), Richard Boyd Barrett (PBP), Gino Kenny (PBP), Mick Barry (Solidarity) and Joan Collins – as well as 2 other left TDs, Catherine Connolly and Thomas Pringle, elected to the Dáil (parliament). From this position our movements are better positioned to fight against any attempts at austerity and for the radical socialist policies needed to improve the lives of working people. We can also prove the limitations and contradictions of the capitalist system, especially when faced with a crisis such as this, and guide them in the direction of Marxist ideas as a way of organising society.

Jessy Ní Cheallaigh

P.S.

• No Borders News. 20 April 2020:
<https://nobordersnews.org/2020/04/20/jessy-ni-cheallaigh-ireland-flattens-the-curve-but-socialist-policies-needed/>

Footnotes

[1] *Irish Post*, 18 April 2020 [“Ireland’s COVID-19 restrictions have ‘flattened the curve so much there is no peak’](#).”

[2] Reuters, 9 April 2020 [“Irish coronavirus adjusted unemployment rate soars to 16.5%”](#).

[3] *Irish Post* 20 April 2020 [“Irish coronavirus cases surpass 15,000”](#).

[4] *Irish Times* 19 April 2020 [“Coronavirus outbreaks identified in 53 care homes in Northern Ireland”](#).

[5] Daniel Finn, *Jacobin* 13 February 2020 [“Ireland’s Left Turn”-<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2020/02/ireland-election-results-sinn-fein>>].

[6] Oliver Eagleton *Jacobin* 9 November 2019 [“Ireland’s Prisons for Migrants”](#).

[7] *New York Times* 10 April 2020 [“Legal Abortion Begins in Northern Ireland”](#).