Socialist Voice

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Water Charges

May Day: 'Today is our great day, the day when the solidarity of the international proletariat is being expressed throughout the world by mass demonstrations.
Speech delivered in Stockholm on 1 May, 1912
Alexandra Kollontai (Russian Bolshevik, writer and the first woman ambassador).

Working people need vigilance

The water struggle shows clearly the important and central role of mass mobilisation by working people in defence of their interests. The struggle created a focus and channelled the deep frustration of working people over "austerity," the bank bail-outs, NAMA, the savage cuts in wages, and deteriorating working conditions **Eugene McCartan** reports CONTINUED Page 2

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▲ Irish communists campaigning against debt and water charges

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Water Charges Be Vigilant

A vibrant and dynamic coalition developed around what many believe was an achievable goal, the defeat of water charges. The emergence of Right2Water gave structure and direction to the developing mass movement, while the five trade unions involved played a central role in providing organisation, resources, and strategic direction.

But at the heart of the struggle were the community groups, which blocked roads and prevented the installation of water meters, and the tens of thousands who marched and demonstrated.

It was this alliance of community activism and trade union strength that created the political pressure on the ground that forced the political establishment and the European Union back. This strength was recognised, and opportunistically exploited, by Fianna Fáil to rebuild itself electorally. But these were not the only politically opportunist forces at work.

Over the the last few months the establishment and the European Union regrouped and came forward with their counter-strategy, which Fine Gael pursued through the Dáil committee on water, resulting in the huge retreat and U-turn by Fianna Fáil. The establishment parties of Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil and Labour have opened a back door to allow for possible future water charges, under the guise of penalties for those found wasting water, and have also agreed that all new houses and apartments will have meters installed.

We know from previous waivers and allowances for domestic waste collection that these so-called allowances quickly disappear and full charges are imposed. The major demand of Right2Water—an amendment to the Constitution of Ireland guaranteeing the people's ownership of all water resources—remains part of the Dáil committee's recommendations. People need to put Fianna Fáil TDs' feet to the fire to make sure they do not backslide on this crucial demand.

We need to continue to mobilise at the grass-roots level to ensure that all those politicians and parties that stood in the last general election on a platform of abolishing charges and for a constitutional amendment are held to account. In addition, we need to demand that all charges pending against water activists be dropped and all convictions quashed. The state cannot be allowed to criminalise peaceful protest.

The treatment of the Jobstown water activists now facing trial and possible prison terms exposes the vindictiveness of the establishment and their state and judicial system.

The stacking or rigging of any possible jury in the forthcoming trial is so blatant as to be beyond belief. That no-one from Tallaght or no-one who has ever taken part in a water demonstration should be permitted to sit on the jury is nothing more than retaliation by the state against working people for having the audacity to challenge the Irish establishment.

The message is clear: dissent will not be tolerated. Where stands now our so-called liberal intelligentsia?

Equally, many of the trade unions that sat on the sideline during the last three years have a duty and responsibility to throw their weight behind the struggle to secure a referendum on the people's ownership of water. The role of the Labour Party and in particular of Alan Kelly has been appalling and has exposed the bankrupt nature of the present leadership of that party. They can only salvage what little credit they have left with working people if they step up to the mark regarding public ownership of water.

For working people this is not a time to feel that we have been let down but rather to measure how far we have travelled—how far we drove the Irish establishment and the EU back; to see that we have power in our numbers, in our organisation and in ourselves to effect change.

The establishment will spin it as a victory for "common sense," but this is not the case. Working people need to remember that laws in our society are nothing more than congealed politics. That is why workers have few rights but all the obligations, while employers, the owners of wealth, have all their rights protected and few if any responsibilities.

The establishment have constantly tried to draw the people's demands into the quagmire of Dáil procedures and committees, into structures and processes that they control. This is a tactic designed to negate the demands and will of the people and make them submit to corporate needs and power.

The fight to win an end to water charges and a constitutional amendment is far from over. Working people need to keep up political campaigning and pressure. Through organised protests, we have made great advances, but now is not the time to stand back and watch parliamentary manoeuvring rob us of our victory.

We have driven them back. We can now push forward and secure the people's ownership of water. Unity is our strength; organisation is the means to bring victory.★

Housing in the 21st century

Jimmy Doran

THE CENTRAL Statistics Office recently published a report on housing from the information obtained in the 2016 census. It shows that overcrowding and rackrenting are now the norm in Ireland—and it's getting worse.

Over the five-year period 2011–16 the number of available properties increased by only 0.4 per cent, despite a growth in population of ten times that. Home ownership is down nationally to 67 per cent, and to 59 per cent in Dublin—a rate not seen since 1971, and it's continuing to fall.

Renting has overtaken ownership in our towns and cities as the main form of property tenure. Apartments are the predominant type of home in Dublin, for the first time ever.

Overcrowding is up for the first time in fifty years: one in ten of our people now live in overcrowded conditions, and this too is getting worse.

Average rent nationally is €200 a week—up from €171; that's an increase of nearly 17 per cent. In Dublin the increase has been 30 per cent in the last five years and it's still rising, despite very little, if any, increase in wages for the last ten years.

As citizens migrate to cities and towns in search of work, some towns have almost half their dwellings vacant.

What these statistics reveal is a national housing disaster. The minister responsible, Simon Coveney, responds by saying that the problem will take time to sort out. Well, it took them fifty years to engineer this crisis through failed right-wing housing policy, a policy that does not work for our citizens but most certainly works for the politicians' friends in big business, who control the property market and who, under the guise of "austerity" to "save the economy," decided that citizens should no longer own their own home, that this is to be the privilege of the chosen few, who will then rent them back to the citizens at a massive profit while causing misery to the tenants.

Bit by bit the Government abandoned its responsibility of housing our citizens in its entirety to the private sector. When the 26-County state was formed in the 1920s it inherited a colonial housing catastrophe. Dublin had some of the worst slums in Europe, as the citizens had been left to the mercy of unregulated landlords and financiers to provide them with shelter.

In the 1930s, as a direct result of the collapse of several tenement buildings, resulting in a number of deaths, the Government was forced to live up to its responsibilities and begin a massive building programme of public housing for our citizens. Everywhere, from Cork to Donegal, new publicly owned houses were built at a rate that matched the building of private houses, 1:1, right up to the mid-1960s, when the policy began to change. Council tenants were now encouraged to buy their home from the state. This was the start of the shift in policy that has culminated in the crisis we now find ourselves in.

The day of owning your own home is very quickly becoming a thing of the past for ordinary working people. More and more people are now forced to rent a home, thanks to falling wages and precarious work. This in turn leads to higher rents as demand rises. The profiteers are always waiting in the wings for an opportunity to make more money.

And the day of small indigenous landlords owning a few properties is disappearing fast as international capital sees a lucrative business opportunity. We have transnational property companies buying up, or building, large numbers of properties for the rental market in our cities. Ireland is not unique, as this is becoming the norm all round the developed world as another stage in the development of capitalism.

Not satisfied with the profit from a one-off sale of a house to individuals, the ruling class want to retain ownership of the property and create a continuous income stream in their never-ending search for more profits and new markets.

When you are on minimum-wage and minimum-hour contracts you don't have much of a choice, so "the best little country in the world to do business in" has come full circle as citizens are left to the mercy of landlords and financiers to obtain shelter.

Once again we've ended up with the most vulnerable living in overcrowded tenements. History has a habit of repeating itself. The answer now, as it was in the 1930s, is a massive public house-building programme. These should be built by the state, right through from the planning stage to completion. Surveys show that publicly built houses cost between 30 and 40 per cent less than those built by the private sector.

The building and property speculators have done enough damage to this country already, and there is too much of a history of bribery, corruption and planning irregularities for them to be trusted again. Priory Hall is what happens when you have an unregulated private sector.

With private capital removed from the equation, shortages will cease to exist and certainty will return to housing. With all our citizens living in decent homes this will benefit the whole of society as quality of life improves. Instead of tenants being encouraged to buy their home from the state, home-owners should be encouraged to sell their property to the state as they retire. Then, when their time comes, all these houses would go into public ownership, thus helping citizens financially in their retirement and providing quality housing for future generations.★

British ruling class pays scant attention to the North

Two months after an Assembly election, the North's electorate is being asked to return to the polls in June. This time, though, the people of the Six Counties will have little say in the outcome or the policies made afterwards. **Tommy McKearney** reports

THERESA MAY'S decision to call a general election was a purely cynical action, not designed to secure certainty over Brexit negotiations but an attempt to take advantage of a weakened Labour Party and thus extend her time in Downing Street.

Since taking office ten months ago May repeatedly denied having any intention of calling an early general election. She has not only performed a barefaced U-turn but has also made nonsense of the Fixed-Term Parliaments Act (2011). Although opinion polls are forecasting a comfortable victory for the Conservative Party, the outcome may ultimately lead to greater instability within the United Kingdom.

Whatever Theresa May's underlying reasons for calling the election, the focus will be on Brexit. The Tory party will have to reveal in some detail its intentions in conducting negotiations with the European Union, and this is bound to cause difficulties. Although England voted to leave the EU, it did so by less than 7 per cent—a comfortable margin in a referendum but possibly less so when subjected to party-political differences.

If the manifesto's negotiation commitments are sufficiently robust to appease the Conservative Party's hard-line Eurosceptics, it risks driving many middle-class swing voters back to the Liberal Democrats. On the other hand, offering a soft exit might very well perpetuate the problem with Tory backbenchers that the referendum and this election were supposed to address.

Not that reactionary Tories are Britain's only source of instability. Scotland's first minister, Nicola Sturgeon, said that for the Scottish National Party this election would be about whether Scots want English Tories to have a free hand in determining their country's future. With many Scottish voters already alienated by years of austerity and London arrogance, the prospect of yet another Conservative government is unlikely to be widely welcomed. A second independence referendum is already being mooted; and whatever the outcome, the Scottish Parliament will continue to create a challenge for a unitary British state.

There is one possible result that might soften Scottish working-class anger, and that would be a left-leaning, anti-austerity Labour government determined to tackle the multitude of ills inflicted by four decades of Tory and New Labour neo-liberalism. Unfortunately, though, the prospect of such an outcome is slim. Blairite influence within the Parliamentary Labour Party is strong. Through their public criticism of Jeremy Corbyn, which is tantamount to sabotage, they have severely damaged his prospects of leading a new government.

Nevertheless, a defeat for Labour could prove to be a pyrrhic victory for Britain's ruling class. Corbyn might stand down, but the rift within the party would not be ended. Old-style British social democracy, which for decades shored up a cosy governing

consensus, cannot answer problems created for working people by decades of neo-liberalism. Inequality and deprivation are increasing in Britain, where almost a million workers are getting by on zero-hour contracts,[1] while the BBC recently reported that average weekly earnings are still £26 below where they were at their peak in 2008.[2]

If, after the election, a defeated Labour Party rejects Corbyn-McDonnell economics in favour of returning to a Blairite programme, one of two things will happen: either the party will split, or a large number of working-class voters will desert, creating a political vacuum. Whether this space will be filled by UKIP or a British Jean-Luc Mélenchon is a moot point.

It should come as no surprise, therefore, that during this election campaign the British ruling class is paying scant attention to Northern Ireland and its difficulties.

Unionism is deeply worried by the implications of the recent Assembly elections, which saw it lose seats and its absolute majority in Stormont. Although not imminent, this has raised the possibility of an end to partition, with even the far from sensationalist *Financial Times* publishing an article last month about Irish unity.[3]

Consequently, both the DUP and the Ulster Unionist Party will treat this general election as a plebiscite on the union. To reassure their grass roots they will concentrate on amassing the largest possible number of pro-union votes by turning the election into a single-issue contest. This will reduce the election to an old-fashioned sectarian head count—because, in one form or another, partition has been at the centre of every election in Northern Ireland since 1920.

What makes for a difference now is that there is evidence that the balance of power is slowly shifting away from maintaining partition and the union. Writing in the pro-Unionist *News Letter* a few days after the Assembly elections, its deputy editor, Ben Lowry, said: *"If the correlation between Catholicism and Irish nationalism remains similarly high in the decades to come, unionism is in deep trouble given the small but relentless demographic change."*[4] No-one should underestimate the impact this has within unionist communities in the Six Counties.

In spite of this, both nationalist parties have decided to campaign on an anti-Brexit platform, stressing the possibility of a hard border and raising fears that this will have a detrimental effect on the North's economy. On the surface this appears to be a more enlightened approach than that of the unionist parties; it is nevertheless both evasive and more than a little disingenuous.

For a start, Brexit is now politically irreversible. EU regulations have a negative effect on the Irish economy, north and south, and travel restrictions will be at the ports of entry to Britain rather than along the border. Moreover, concentrating on Brexit is sidestepping crucial questions about the Northern state's future.

To avoid a repetition of past violence in the North it is necessary to emphasise the inevitability of change and is important, therefore, to demonstrate that, under certain conditions, unity can offer a better quality of life for a majority of people throughout Ireland. That "certain condition" is a workers' republic; and to make it more than a catch-cry or an aspiration it needs to be promoted in both word and deed.

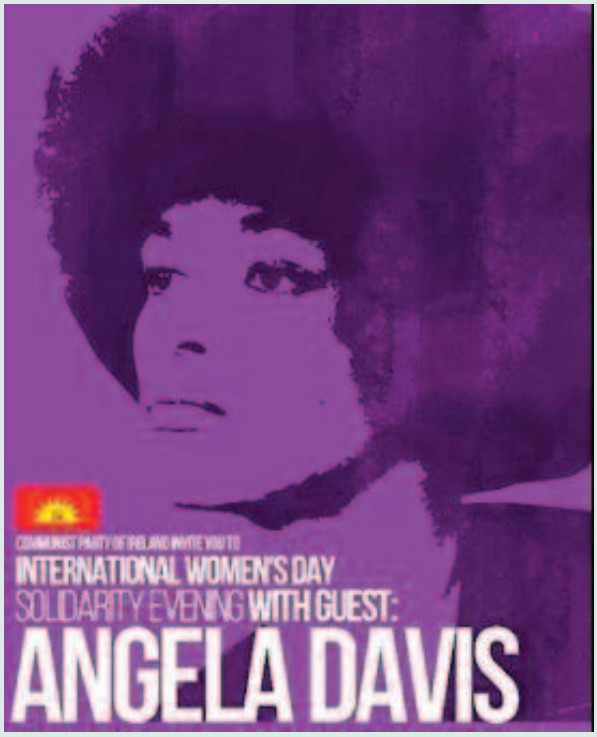
This election could be used to launch a campaign for a public housing programme, workers' rights, a genuine living wage, proper care for the elderly, and secular education—issues that would offer a concrete illustration of how we can transform society for the better in a workers' state.

Unfortunately, this is unlikely to happen, and, just as in Britain, uncertainty for the North's working class will continue after the 8th of June.

While it is unlikely that there will be significant change in the immediate aftermath of this election, it will be important that progressive forces within the wider labour movement in Britain retain critical mass. How successful these currents are at holding their ground is what should concern the left, both here and across the Irish Sea.★

1 Sarah O'Connor, "Taylor confronts gig economy challenges," *Financial Times*, 15 April 2017.
2 Kamal Ahmed, "Farewell to pay growth," *BBC News*, 12 April 2017.
3 Vincent Boland, "Brexit brings Irish reunification back into the spotlight," *Financial Times*, 31 March 2017.
4 Ben Lowry, "Northern Ireland's future in the UK now depends on Alliance voters," *News Letter*, 5 March 2017.

Angela Davis visits Belfast



A centrepiece of this year's week-long International Women's Day celebration in Belfast was the visit of Angela Davis. She spoke at three packed meetings in Belfast: in City Hall, in Queen's University, and in one of the main hotels in the city.

The Communist Party of Ireland hosted the meeting in the Ramada Hotel, which was combined with the launch of our recent republication of *Selected Writings on Women* by James Connolly. The meeting, which also included music and song, drew women and men from all over Ireland.

It's clear that Angela Davis has not lost any of her fire or passion or her commitment to the cause of opposing the oppression of the black people of her home country. She also expressed her solidarity with the Palestinian people. During her talk she drew upon her experience and recollections of the early days of the civil rights struggle and what she had heard of the struggle for civil rights taking place in the Six Counties.

The whole visit was a great success, with much credit going to the women members of the CPI who put in so much work to make the meetings the success they were. Particular gratitude was also acknowledged by all those in attendance to the national chairperson of the CPI, Lynda Walker, who was central to securing Angela Davis's visit to Belfast and to the success of the meetings, and also for her role over the years in building up the celebration of International Women's Day to the strength and breadth of the events that now take place.

The Dublin District of the CPI also had a packed launch by Catherine Connolly TD on the *Selected Writings on Women* by Connolly. The launch, jointly organised with the Connolly Youth Movement, was followed by a selection of readings from the book and by a number of women singers and musicians.★

Ireland in debt

Ireland in 2017 is in a state of confusion. On the one hand the official line tells us that we are out of the recession, that government revenue and expenditure are increasing annually. The level of general government deficit is declining, and government debt in 2016 was 75 per cent of GDP—from a peak of 120 per cent in 2013. **Eoghan O'Neill** reveals the human cost of debt.

We still need to borrow money to finance government expenditure, but at continually lower levels. Employment is increasing, and unemployment is decreasing (6½ per cent in 2016), while we are stabilising migration levels. Recording net immigration for the first time since 2009, we still maintained net emigration of 10,700 Irish nationals in 2016.

On the other hand, once we switch off the official paradigm and dig deeper into the government figures we see that the reality for more and more people is contrary to that of official Ireland. The major shifts and changes in the work-place alone that have occurred since 2007 or 2008 include, to name a few:

- the transforming of stable employment into precarious employment
- the early retirement and replacement of experienced and unionised workers with entry-grade workers
- the inequality of pay in public-sector jobs
- the erosion of standards, terms and conditions in employment contracts
- the introduction of "internship" schemes.

These have meant that, over this ten-year period, labour has been devalued, both in monetary and merit terms.

The Government and its media mouthpieces endlessly parade official Ireland as a success, again being used as the EU's poster child. But what price will the present and future generations of Irish workers have to pay to maintain the thin veil that separates statistical figures from material reality?

Fig. 1 shows Government figures for receipts (money in) and payments (money out), taken from the Report on the Accounts of the Public Services, 2015, up to and including the audited accounts for 2015. Taking this ten-year period will point towards trends to give a sense of the trajectory of this state.

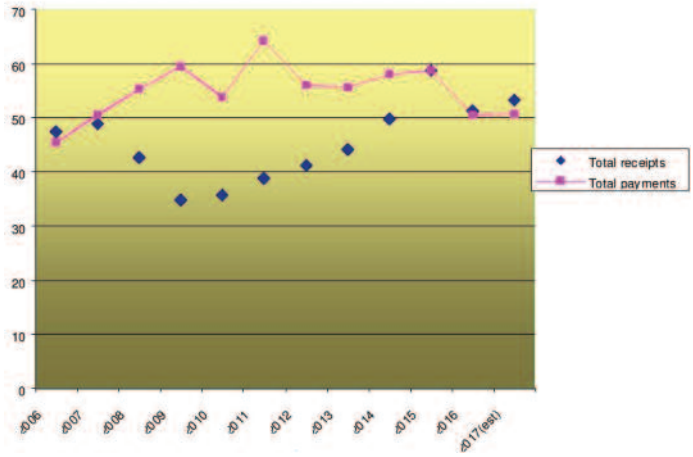


Fig. 1: Total government receipts and payments, 2006–2016

When dealing with government budgets, a simple analogy of a working household with a combined income of approximately €50,000 might shine some light on the situation. When households make out a family budget they naturally take account of all expected income and expenditure. If their expenditure is greater than income, households will either reduce their expenditure or take out loans to increase their current income.

Governments are no different: it's the scale and scope of budgets that separate them, but the fundamental premise of economic stability is that income, in the long run, needs to be equal to, or greater than, expenditure.

Families are aware that if they borrow they are either opting to reduce spending some time in the future or will need to increase their income. If they get into debt, for whatever reason, they will have to take care of the short-term interest payments and the medium to long-term principal debt. The household budget will then have to be adjusted to take account of the payments.

If, furthermore, a source of income is reduced as a result of retirement, cuts in working hours, a cut in wages,

Table 1: Servicing the national debt, 2006–2015 (€ billion)	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Servicing of national debt	1.68	1.68	1.61	2.64	3.62	4.74	5.82	7.46	7.58	7.11
Gross general government debt	44.16	47.57	80.17	104.78	144.23	189.71	209.99	215.30	203.30	201.27
Gross general government debt as proportion of GDP		25%	42%	62%	86%	110%	120%	120%	105%	79%

or any other reason, further adjustments to the household's budget will have to be made, and family austerity kicks in.

A combined effect of having high debt and loss of income will be that all fixed, variable and discretionary expenditure will come under scrutiny in order to balance the budget. If income is still less than expenditure, further loans may be required to pay for current expenditure and debts. A family may need to supplement its income by taking on other jobs and getting other family members to contribute to the pot, while also reducing their level of expenditure.

Here's the spoiler: no honest or sensible family member would ever take on a debt burden not of their own making, to the amount of many times total family income, and thus jeopardise the future stability of the family.

Leaving the family analogy and coming back to Ireland, our budgets up until the bank guarantee were balancing. We had balanced levels of income and expenditure. Of course the source of our income—with a narrow focus on construction, financed by international capital and managed by mainly Irish banks—was a large factor in the amassing of such a debt.

Once the banking system was bailed out by the taxpayer in 2008, permanent indebtedness followed. This affected government sources of income and levels of expenditure, as seen in the graph (fig. 1). Money coming in to pay for central government dropped, while the costs and payments increased, and remained high, because of increases in welfare payments and of course the state's bail-outs and pay-outs for the numerous banking institutions.

We've only now, in 2017, come to a stabilising level of income and expenditure, nearly a full ten years after the crisis. The cost of that stability, however, has meant increased taxes on incomes, goods and services, and cuts in public services. Cuts in government spending allow the state to wash its hands of the provision of services, opting for privately run operations instead. Take-home pay has stagnated or fallen. The fall-out from the failure in policy of our construction-led economy has led to mass unemployment and emigration.

The further policy of guaranteeing an odious private debt has led to permanent austerity and permanent debt, which has further driven privatisation and new terms in work contracts. High unemployment opened up avenues for unpaid internships, displacing paid labour, which has now embedded itself as a norm in nearly all work-places.

This is what awaits the thousands finishing school or graduating from university this year and entering the work force, and the millions more who will follow.

The difference between the position of the balanced budgets in the years leading up to the crisis and today is the massive debt burden hanging over the Irish people. For example, interest payments on general government debt are in the region of 14 per cent of government revenue. As the table and fig. 3 show, the Irish state has had to pay out more than €40 billion on servicing the national debt since 2008. Ireland has the third-highest expenditure on debt-servicing in the euro zone as a percentage of GDP, at 4.7 per cent, as seen in fig. 2.

Fig. 2: General government debt and interest, 1982–2018

Not only have we paid out billions for a debt that wasn't of our making but Ireland's economy will be saddled with debt payments for decades to come. Irish people still carry the second-largest debt burden per capita in the world, at €43,571 per head.

Fig. 3 shows the maturity profile of government bonds and EU-IMF programme debt (totalling €171 billion) at the end of June 2016. Almost 34 per cent of this outstanding debt is due to mature in the period 2017–2020. Here is an extract from the Report on the Accounts of the Public Services:

> The NTMA expects to hold year-end 2016 cash and liquid asset balances of approximately €8 billion. The next significant bond maturity is in the fourth quarter of 2017; the current balance outstanding is €6.3 billion. Looking further ahead of the forecast horizon, there are significant bond redemptions to fund, particularly in 2019 and 2020 when four separate Government bonds mature. The current aggregate outstanding balance on these bonds is just under €34 billion. Bilateral loans from the UK, Denmark and Sweden also begin to mature in 2019. The next IMF maturity is in 2021.

This means that in the next three to four years the Government must use approximately €58 billion of its revenue to pay off these debts—that is, nearly three years' worth of the income tax paid by more than two million people employed in this state. They may opt to sell Government bonds to help pay off some of it, but all that will do is add to the generations of Irish people who will have to pay back the odious private debt.

The failure of the political establishment to work on behalf of the people and instead to look after the interests of foreign and domestic capital is not surprising. However, if working people fail to come to the radical notion that it is our sovereign right to reject and repudiate the odious debt, then we pass on our burden to future generations.

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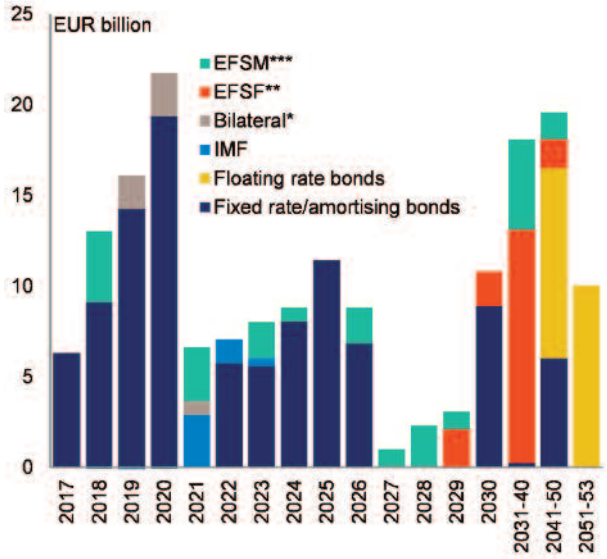
Fig. 3: Maturity profile of government bonds and EU-IMF programme debt, June 2016



It is in the context of this debt that we must try to steer a new, radical course for ourselves. The policies of Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil and the Labour Party will continue. They will continue to reduce the funds made available to local authorities (from €8.5 billion in 2007 to €4.3 billion in 2015), stripping away funds for essential services to our communities.

It is a simple move by the Government to abdicate responsibility for the provision and maintenance of these schemes, thereby reducing its costs and so helping to balance that budget. Current international trade agreements sponsored by the EU will set up new waves of privatisation of public assets and services, which are supported by the political establishment and are already under way with our water and our public transport system. Only militant workers' and community action has halted the wave for now, but it will hit again.

People may look to Sinn Féin, but whether it can mount a challenge will depend on it becoming radical on the debt issue and our relationship to the EU. With its focus on the unification of the two failed states, it is unlikely that it will suddenly mount a serious challenge to the EU powers; and so Sinn Féin, as it stands, cannot bring forward the radical politics needed if Ireland is to rid itself of this odious debt, regain its economic and political sovereignty, reverse the privatisation agenda in favour of public ownership and provision, strengthen the power of labour over capital, and, most importantly, depend not on international capital and foreign investment but on the ability of Irish working people to create, produce and reproduce a sustainable, developed and planned economy.

What may seem the most natural thing is also often the most radical.★

Debt, inequality, and industrial action

The chicken or the egg?

Nicola Lawlor

TRADE UNIONS remain the most tangible and most effective means of reducing inequality. Unionised work-places tend to have fairer, more transparent and more equitable pay models, which provide pay increases year by year for workers above inflation. They redistribute wealth from the surplus value created by workers that would otherwise go to profits (or dividends and executive pay).

However, as unions have weakened, and union density throughout the economy has weakened, all workers have suffered. Low pay has become more prevalent, inequality has grown, and contracts have returned to the more "flexible" model of the nineteenth century.

There is no one reason for the weakening of the trade union movement. Much has been written about the "partnership" model, the neo-liberal offensive of the last five decades, and more recently offshoring, monopolisation, and the global labour arbitrage. But there are three interrelated factors in Ireland that, while not direct cause-and-effect phenomena, are most certainly related and reinforcing, creating a self-fulfilling cycle. These are household debt, growing inequality, and declining industrial action and union density.

Fig. 1, showing income and union membership in Britain, has done the rounds on social media, sparking much comment and debate. But what does something similar for Ireland (south) look like?

Fig. 1: Top income and union membership, Britain, 1908–2006

Increasing household debt

It is well documented that household debt, most significantly mortgages, has been on the increase in Ireland for some time and most markedly from the mid-1990s on.

Fig. 2: Household and corporate debt, 1971–201

Fig. 3: Household debt as proportion of disposable income, 1995–2011

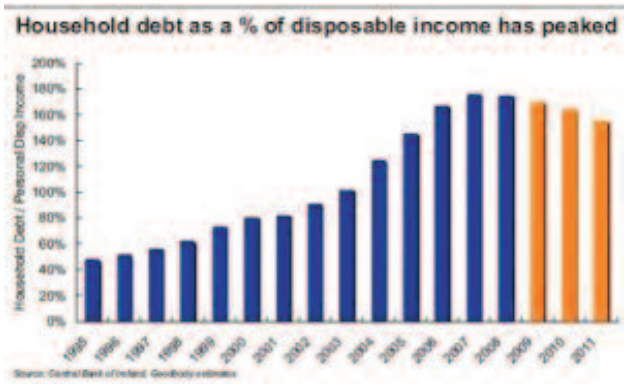
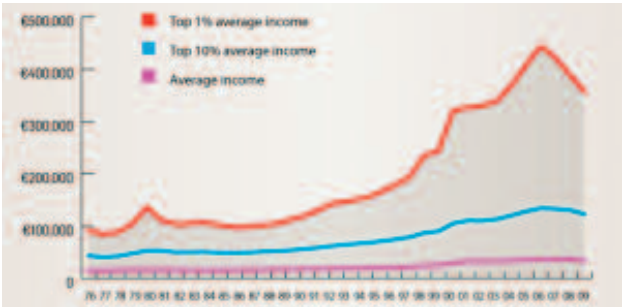


Fig. 2 and fig. 3 demonstrate this, firstly in money lent and secondly in the ratio of debt to disposable income. But both clearly show the increase.

Rising inequality

While the average income of the top 1 per cent has grown fourfold and of the top 10 per cent has also grown significantly, the average income has not grown at the same rate but instead has largely stagnated, while at the same time house prices were rocketing. Obviously, if average incomes stagnated in the 2000s and house prices increased, then household debt will climb, as shown in fig. 2 and fig. 3.

Fig. 4: Average income, 1976–2009



The declining power of unions

Although power can be measured in many ways, union density and industrial action are strong indications of union power in society; and both have been on the wane since the early 1980s.

Fig. 5: Union density, 1945–2010

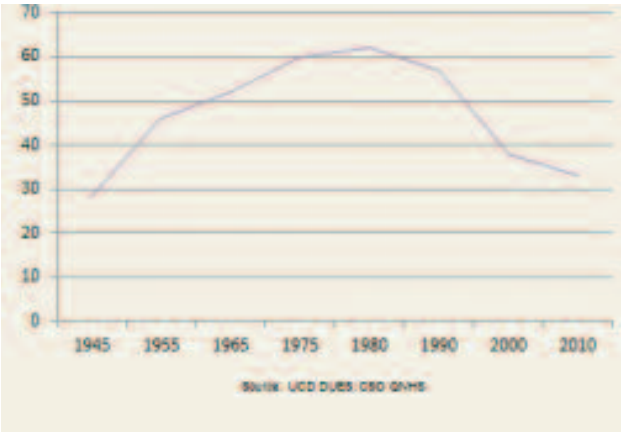


Fig. 5 shows union density peaking above 60 per cent of the work force about 1980 and then declining each year to just over half that, at between 32 and 34 per cent today.

Fig. 6: Days lost as a result of industrial disputes, 1986–2015

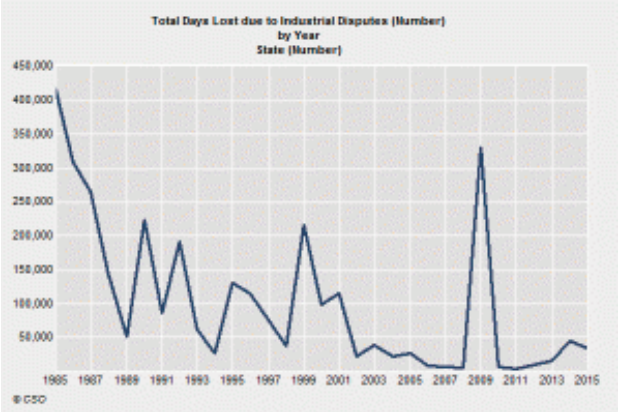


Fig. 7: Number of firms involved in industrial disputes, 1986–2015

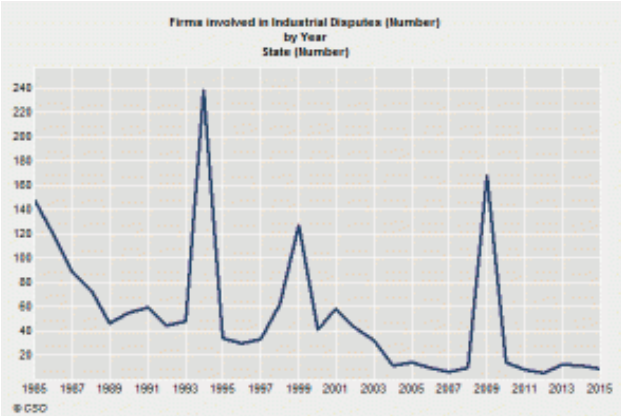


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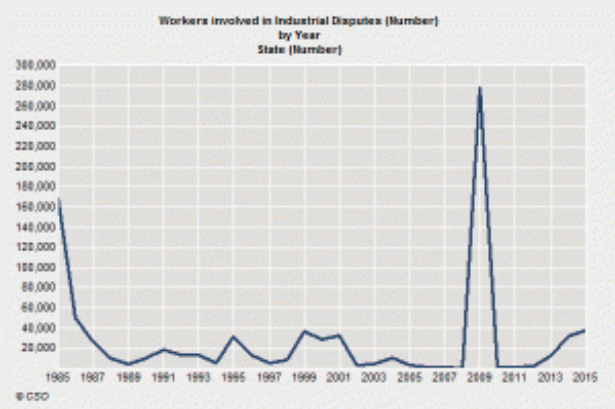
Fig. 8: Number of workers involved in industrial disputes, 1985–2015



Using the CSO's series of measurements of days lost, number of workers involved, and number of firms, going back to 1985, again we can just about see that, on all measurements, industrial action has been declining from the mid-80s to today, with a slight peak in 2009 as a result of action in the public sector, and again we will see a peak in early 2017 when the series are updated.

Which came first?

One might be tempted to ask, Which came first, the chicken or the egg?—but please don't. It isn't that simple. But there certainly is a reinforcing relationship between rising household debt and the hold this has over workers, making it much harder to take industrial action and risk losing pay.

This then contributes to weakening union power, meaning that a greater share of all wealth created by workers goes to the elite and top earners.★

An Argentine-Irish rebel in Cuba

Rodolfo Jorge Walsh

Tomás Mac Síomóin

CHE GUEVARA was not the only Argentine-Irish rebel to join the Cuban Revolution. Rodolfo Jorge Walsh, the fortieth anniversary of whose murder by the then Argentine dictatorship occurred on the 25th of March last, shared this honour. His contribution may have saved Cuba from counter-revolutionary turmoil, or worse

Dialling his story back to 1961, coded messages from the United States to Guatemala, where CIA-backed mercenaries were in training, were intercepted by Cuban intelligence. One of these messages named the time of their proposed invasion of Cuba and the exact landing-place, Playa Girón. The Nobel Prize-winning Colombian novelist Gabriel García Márquez claimed that this message was deciphered by Rodolfo Jorge Walsh, a revolutionary writer and journalist who had come to Cuba to offer his talents to the revolution there.

Along with García, Walsh was one of the founders of Prensa Latina in Havana and became head of the Special Services section of that famous news agency. Fidel Castro was duly informed about the CIA's intentions and positioned his forces to crush this assault on Cuban sovereignty.

The unobstructed survival of the Cuban Revolution may well have hinged on knowledge gleaned by Walsh that enabled the Cuban revolutionary command to know exactly where the counter-revolutionary force planned to establish their beachhead. Reinforcements of soldiers and materials would have arrived there, a US-recognised counter-revolutionary government established, and war waged on the Revolution. But, thanks to the skill of Rodolfo Walsh, this scenario never unfolded . . .

While Che traced his Irish roots to eighteenth-century Galway, Walsh traced his to a nineteenth-century emigration from the post-famine midlands to rural Argentina. He was born in 1927 to a fervently Catholic family and received his early education at an Irish missionary school. Both his parents were of Irish origin, his mother being a Gahan. Argentine characters named O'Hara, Carmody, Delaney, Mulally, Kiernan, Mulligan, Murtagh etc. appear in his fiction, for example in his novella *Irlandeses Detrás de un Gato*.

However, his prowess as an investigative journalist and writer of

The Koch Brothers and Donald Trump

Dan Taraghan

IN *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852), Karl Marx stated: *"Hegel remarks somewhere that all facts and personages of great importance in world history occur as it were twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce."*

Hitler was the tragedy. Trump is the farce.

Social democrats and many on the left, and even the Koch Brothers on the far right, regard Trump as the reincarnation of Adolf Hitler. Charles Koch described Trump's attempt to ban immigrants from particular Muslim countries as similar to the policies of Adolf Hitler. However, the Koch Brothers later qualified this early assessment when they realised how much influence they might have in the Trump government.

If anything, Trump is a throwback to an old-style isolationist. The United States is an imperial power that has lost its dominance and the ability to engage in gunboat diplomacy without suffering any consequences.

It is true that Trump groomed the electorate to accept racism and bigotry against Hispanics, non-whites, and Muslims. He converted the election into a series of sound-bites like a television show, and, despite failing to win an overall majority, because of the electoral system in the United States, he became president anyway.

The American courts and politicians have shown resilience in resisting Trump. More than forty unions backed Clinton, with only three endorsing Trump. Although 46 per cent of union households voted for Trump, union leaders are already reminding members of their role in protecting basic freedoms. Richard Trumka, president of the national federation, the AFL-CIO, sent a clear warning to Trump that those now feeling vulnerable to attack because of their colour, sexuality or religion were not alone and that the labour movement would "protect the freedoms for all who live and work here."

Trump lacks credibility, with spokespersons like "Spoofer" Spicer and Steve Bannon of *Breitbart News*, purveyors of fake news. The proposed Trump Wall has little support among farmers in need of Hispanic labourers. The attempt to ban Muslims floundered, and his attempt to get rid of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act or "Obamacare" has been defeated.

Even the repeal of environmental laws will have little impact. It will not produce the jobs promised, as the United States is already switching to non-fossil sources of energy. Trump's

Wiki

fiction ensured that his voice transcended the country's Irish diaspora ("a world in itself, inside the wider Argentina," as he described it). His minutely informed defence of the Palestinian cause was especially notable in forming Latin-American opinion regarding the Palestinian national struggle.

Before joining the Cuban Revolution, Walsh had become an essential reference of Latin-American journalism for his searing exposures of social injustice in Argentina. His novel *Operación Masacre* (1957) pioneered the art of presenting facts and real events in the form of fiction. It is a no-holds-barred account of a police massacre in a rubbish dump of a group of ordinary workers, based on the author's rigorous and detailed investigation of the facts of the case, and the subsequent cover-up.

Walsh said that the horror he uncovered then changed his life for ever. The publication of *Operación Masacre* in 1957 predates by nine years Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*. Anglophone literary critics, ignoring non-English-language literature, have described the latter as "the first non-fiction novel," an honour that rightly belongs to Rodolfo Walsh's pioneering work.

Subsequent writers, such as Gabriel García Márquez, exploited the literary possibilities presented by Walsh's approach. As García and Walsh had worked together for Prensa Latina in Havana, it has been suggested that the latter's *Operación Masacre* may well have been a model for the former's award-winning *One Hundred Year of Solitude* (1967), which also ended in a massacre of workers.

After his Cuban stint Walsh went on to play a central role in the fight against the military dictatorship in his native Argentina. In 1976 he founded the Agencia de Noticias Clandestinas (Clandestine News Agency), a news medium of the Intelligence and Information Section of the Montoneros, an armed resistance group dedicated to the overthrow of the dictatorship. He called the agency ANCLA, Spanish for "anchor," to make the dictatorship fear that its workings, as revealed by ANCLA, may have emanated from a non-existent secret revolutionary cell in their own navy.

As ANCLA published material that the dictatorship wanted hidden, its contributors and distributors were marked down by the authorities for torture and "disappearance." This was the fate of Rodolfo Walsh. He died just over forty years ago in Buenos Aires at the hands of the regime's torturers. He had been wounded and captured after being ambushed by a dictatorship patrol. His body was never recovered.

Rodolfo Walsh was forever enthused by the revolutionary possibilities of writing, whether journalistic or fictional. *"Since the beginnings of the bourgeoisie, fiction played an important subversive role which, in these times, is no longer the case. But there must be many ways by which it can do so again . . . to realise that you have a weapon, the typewriter . . . depending on how you handle it, which can be a fan or a pistol—and you can use that machine to achieve tangible results . . . With typewriters and paper you can move people to an incalculable extent."*

This passage is the key to understanding Rodolfo Walsh's revolutionary praxis, a call to arms for radical journalists everywhere.★

proposals for tax reform will, if anything, drive up the costs of imports and do nothing for jobs.

The media have forced the resignation of some of his senior appointments. Even though Trump signed the death cert of the TPP trade negotiations, Richard Trumka told *USA Today* that it was workers and their progressive allies who killed it. By mobilising and organising, workers won the debate in Congress and showed that TPP did nothing to protect workers' rights. In effect, Trump is showing himself to be a farce.

Trump is caught between his opponents on the left, who are prepared to challenge him in the courts and on the streets, and the hard right, which regards him as too socialistic. Trump's government contains such senior members as Mike Pence, who is connected to the Koch Brothers. Paul Ryan, leader of the House of Representatives, is another Koch protégé.

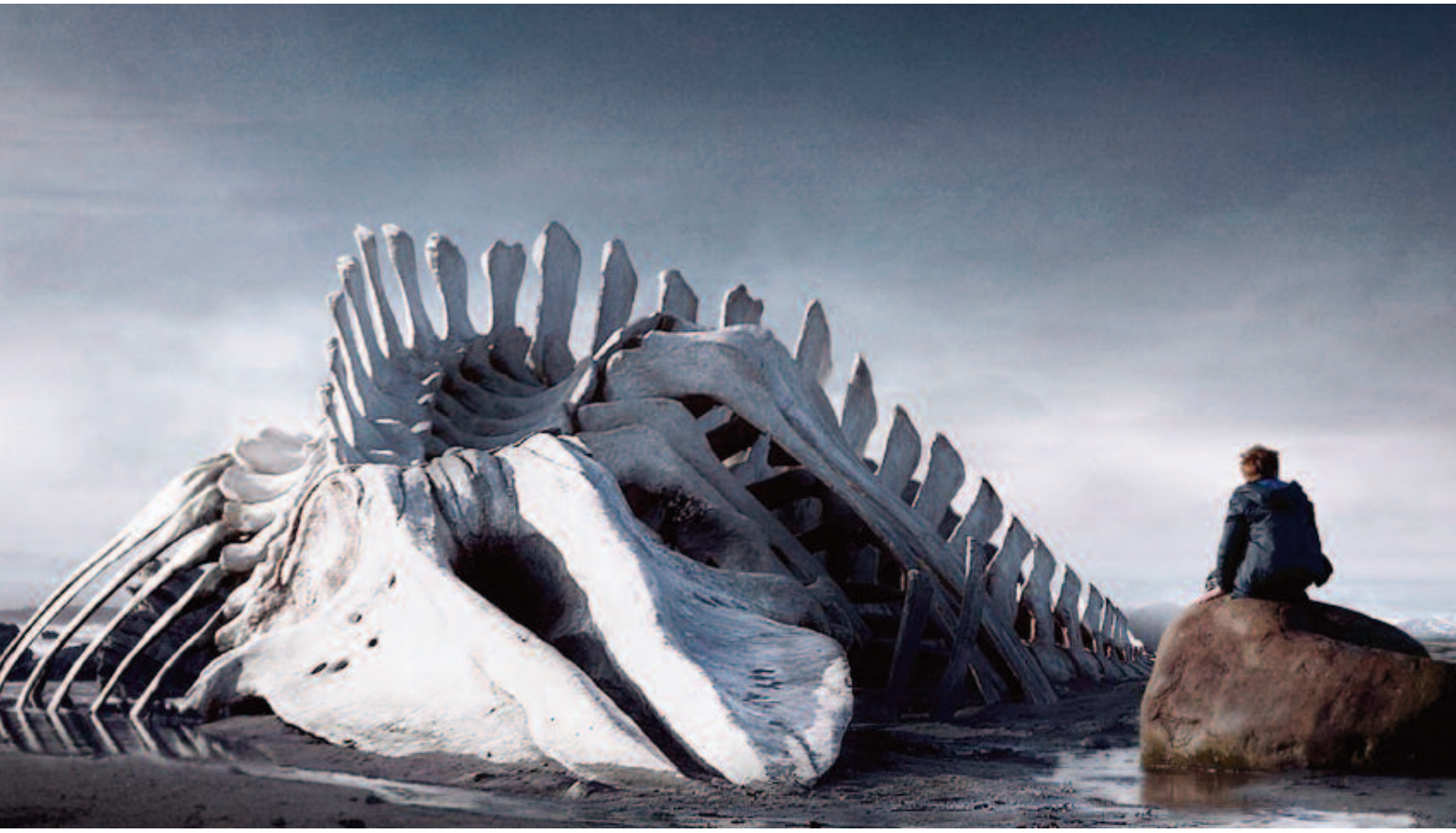
Charles and David Koch have a combined net worth of $96.6 billion. Both have been behind such lobbying groups as Freedom Partners and Americans for Prosperity. The latter group helped organise and finance the Tea Party movement.

The Kochs did not outwardly support Trump, but many of their donors and supporters are on the Trump team. The brothers support the repeal of environmental laws, the abolition of Obamacare, the repeal of campaign funding limits (achieved), deregulation of the medical insurance industry, and privatisation of the postal service and public roads. They oppose abortion services. They oppose personal and corporate taxes, and have availed of Luxembourg's tax avoidance schemes.

In brief, David Koch told the *Wichita Eagle* that since they were teenagers they were worried that the government would evolve into "a very controlling socialistic type of government."

Over the years they have poured millions into the Republican Party. It is widely reported that the Kochs sabotaged Trump's attempt to get rid of Obamacare not on the grounds that they did not support the idea but because Trump was going to retain some parts of the measures. His attempt to repeal the act and replace it with the American Health Care Act was defeated by a lack of support from Republicans. The Koch Brothers promised Republicans financial support in next year's elections if they voted against it. Paul Ryan pulled the bill.

The Kochs and their supporters are free-market anarchists, opposed to trade unions and any attempts by the working class to improve society. A look at the documentary *"Park Avenue: Money, Power, and the American Dream"* gives a flavour of what they really believe.★



Not the 'feelies'

Jenny Farrell

THE DYSTOPIAS of the mid-twentieth century *Brave New World* (1932) and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) described with astonishing accuracy the world we live in today: thought police, Newspeak, genetic engineering, escapist drugs, and a cinema that conditions people not to think about the kind of society they inhabit. Their films, in *Brave New World*, are aptly called the "feelies."

Anybody with a passing awareness of our own mainstream cinema realises that this is exactly what we have today.

The "movies," as opposed to "thinkies," that dominate all our screens present us largely with private, relationship issues, mainly either set in or seen from the middle-class viewpoint and most definitely resolvable within existing society.

Where issues of race or gender are addressed, from the safe distance of historical perspective, we the audience are reassured that we would have acted in an ethical, in fact radical way if only we had lived at that distant time. And of course all is well now, we are assured, and we can leave the cinema affirmed in our self-righteousness.

Not so with some recent Russian films—rarely screened in Western cinemas. One of these is *Leviathan*, by Andrey Zvyagintsev. Its title brings to mind two things. Firstly, the Bible's Book of Job, where Leviathan is described as an enormous, all-consuming sea monster. Secondly, the title evokes Thomas Hobbes's seventeenth-century treatise on the State, Leviathan, which advocated a strong state at the time of the English Revolution, including the alliance between state and church as the best and most reasonable form of government for the people.

Zvyagintsev adds to this equation the story of the American Marvin Heemeyer, who, in 2004, frustrated over a failed zoning dispute, ploughed his bulldozer into the town hall, a former mayor's home and other buildings in the small town of Granby, Colorado. Zvyagintsev, however, sets the film in the culture he knows best: Russia. He changes details of the plot, while revealing the nature of a Leviathan society.

This film was gleefully hailed in the West as a film about corrupt Russia. It was even awarded the Golden Globe. In Russia it was condemned as anti-Russian.

Both angles miss the point. The film exposes the mechanisms of capitalist society and its destruction of ordinary people, their lives, and their happiness. It exposes how little power, what scant hope for justice working people have when faced with the combined power of politicians, the judiciary, and the Church.

It is difficult to think of a recent Western film, outside Ken Loach's work, that presents the very nature of capitalism with such radical honesty and incredible cinematography. In that sense the film is not only about Russia but at the same time is about the inhuman system that is capitalism—anywhere.

Of course its detail is Russian: no film can or should be made in abstractions. Films, like all art, deal in individual lives. Zvyagintsev's film associates the greater context through its title. He also uses the landscape on

the edge of the world—the Barents Sea bordering on the Arctic Ocean, frozen landscapes, wrecked boats, and the skeleton of a blue whale—to emphasise this more encompassing scope. Yet the story is rooted deeply in the everyday minutiae of ordinary working people's lives.

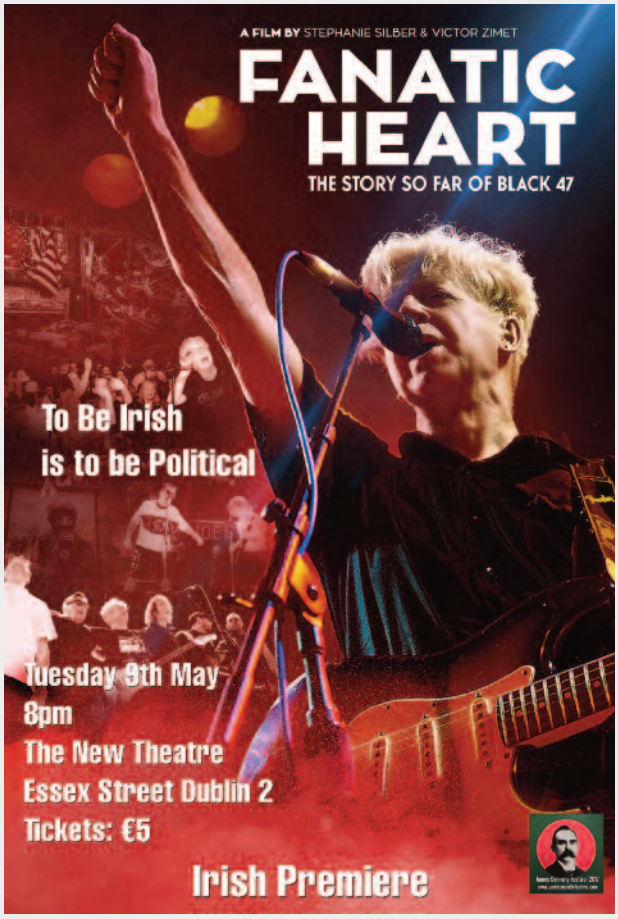
The film shows how the monster devastates this world. There seems to be little hope for humanity. Perhaps some slight courage may be taken from the fact that a friend of the protagonist has the potential to challenge the beast. In *Leviathan,* this path is thwarted and seems unlikely, yet it is there. The fact that the film itself makes a statement about the Leviathan too is important.

Leviathan struck close to the bone in Russia, where, despite everything, art is clearly still understood as a serious comment on society. The Ministry of Culture was outraged and indeed censored its "profanities," amputating the film. It also questioned the entitlement of such a film to taxpayers' financial support. (Films clearly still receive state subventions!) Zvyagintsev himself called on people to watch the illegally copied film on line, in places where it was not shown in cinemas.

The film's impact was such that civic leaders and Orthodox priests and bishops of Samara called on the Minister of Culture to sack Valery Grishko, the actor who plays the bishop in the film, from his position in the state-sponsored theatre. The "image created by this actor is a cynical and dirty parody on Russian orthodox bishops," it said. "It offends the believers and in its essence is nothing else other than blatant mockery of [the] Russian State and the principal religious confession of our country—the Holy Orthodoxy."

To turn to "real life": at the time of writing there is a continuing and growing truck-drivers' strike in Russia (since 27 March). It demonstrates an awareness and readiness to fight against the insatiable appetite of the Leviathan.

Leviathan and other recent Russian films help the audience to identify those who would rather send them to the "feelies" and remain hidden. By describing present-day Russia, however, they reveal the nature of capitalism. Understanding this is a prerequisite for change. As Rosa Luxemburg said, *"the first revolutionary act is to call things by their true names."* We need films like this.★



"To be Irish is to be political"

PART OF the James Connolly Festival, 2017, will be the Irish premiere of *Fanatic Heart: The Story So Far of Black '47*. This is a feature-length documentary that charts the career of the legendary and extremely political band.

Black 47 came together in the New York Irish emigrant scene in the late 1980s. Their music has been described as a "streetwise mix of rock, reggae, ska, and Irish music." The subject matter of their songs was equally diverse, with politics alongside tales of hell-raising, excessive drinking, and sexual misadventures. However, even their name—a reference to the worst year of the Great Famine—put the political nature of the band centre stage. As Kirwan says in the documentary, "to be Irish is to be political."

He has a strong base for this outlook. Born in Wexford, he lived for some time with his grandfather, a staunch republican. Personalities such as Jim Larkin and James Connolly were not just historical figures: they were a real part of family and community memories. Wexford was an ITGWU stronghold and experienced its own lockout in 1911.

According to Kirwan, "music is the perfect vehicle for protest and for political thought. It's not easy, though, to write political songs. I know that for myself; I have a real background in it and I've done it for many years . . . The only way to do it is to use a story to tell it, almost like a parable . . ."

Throughout the years of Black 47, historical figures—including Father Murphy of Boolavogue, Michael Collins, Jim Larkin, and Constance Markievicz—have been the subject of songs told "in character" or through the voices of those around them. The most popular and powerful of these is undoubtedly "James Connolly," which features a spoken-word section, as Connolly addresses his wife:

Oh, Lily, I don't want to die, we've got so much to live for

And I know we're all goin' out to get slaughtered, but I just can't take any more

Just the sight of one more child screamin' from hunger in a Dublin slum

Or his mother slavin' fourteen hours a day for the scum

Who exploit her and take her youth and throw it on a factory floor.

More contemporary Irish figures have also been subjects, including Bobby Sands and Rosemary Nelson. But it wasn't just Irish politics that concerned Kirwan and the band. "Perhaps our finest hour was outright rejection of the Iraq War . . . This stand cost us dearly, but was there any other choice for a political band?"

The title of their CD "Bankers and Gangsters" (2010) summed up their attitude to the economic crisis.

With the generous support of Home Team Productions, the Irish premiere of *Fanatic Heart: The Story So Far of Black 47* takes place on Tuesday 9 May at the New Theatre, East Essex Street. Tickets are now available.★

www.jamesconnollyfestival.com.

The music industry

Eoghan O'Neill

THE PROBLEM with the music scene in Ireland manifests itself in two forms: the pub-owner and the broadcaster.

Live music has been given over to the publican, who dictates the music and the rate of pay of musicians. Chart music, the majority of it being foreign imports, is played every hour by all mainstream radio stations, apart from a few exceptions. Little air time is given to original local artists.

The radio stations, like the pub, run on a profit basis. Accountants now dictate the songs that are played, rather than DJs, and the publicans have become the gatekeepers of live music. The problem, though, is not that there aren't enough high-quality bands or musicians: the problem is that the ability to showcase original music is stiflingly limited.

It all starts at the local level. Very few towns have venues, big or small, that don't involve a pub. Having gigs in pubs also solidifies the image that pubs are the centre of cultural expression; therefore alcohol becomes a cultural expression. This feeds into the image of the drunken Irish and the whole youth binge-drinking culture, that the only way to really express oneself is to get drunk, which has serious ramifications for both physical and mental health.

This isn't to say that live music shouldn't be in pubs, just that they shouldn't be the only avenue available to artists, especially young artists.

There needs to be a revolution in how we think about and organise music, and the arts in general, as a source of entertainment and income. The quality and substance of the charts today and the messages that are sent out are culturally and morally low. They become popular not because they are spectacular pieces of music or have sensational lyrics but because they have massive backing and huge amounts of money behind them, because the radio stations then play them non-stop until they reach saturation point. What gets played in the charts then gets played in the pubs and clubs by acts and DJs, until the next song on the conveyor belt gets churned out, and on it goes.

Of course there are exceptions, but as a whole the music industry is run like every other industry in a capitalist society, to make a profit.

The fact that mainstream music has been relegated to sub-standard acts being churned out, and the few genuine artists that "make it" revel in their success, are taken as evidence that hard work and dedication bring success. This is the myth that is propagated. Probability and reality, the cost of living, over time, removes the original artists from the local scene, and what is left are wedding and cover bands.

A lot of struggling original artists have to subsidise their income by joining cover and wedding bands, as this is where the money is in live music. This then feeds down the line and stunts our cultural growth and vibrancy. Those who want to and who are making music are denied a proper platform.

Even with advances in technology for sharing and getting your music heard, it is a difficult and all too often impenetrable industry to make a living from in the long term.

It should be the duty of any government to ensure that the health and growth of its indigenous musicians, poets and composers of all genres are fully developed and supported, both at the educational level and the work level. The aspirations of so many talented people have never been fulfilled in Ireland because we lack the basic support structures for those wishing to create music for a living.

"Making it" doesn't have to mean getting that million-pound record deal but should be about the people who provide us with entertainment in our towns and cities around the country, week in, week out, making at least a living wage from the thing they love doing most. "Making it" might not be so difficult if that was the case.

It isn't too difficult to envisage a society where music is more democratically owned and directed by the makers of music, where originality, creativity and collaboration come first, before the ability to make a profit. Through schools, college and university courses, the establishment of cultural venues, large and small, subsidised by the Government and run by local musicians and organisers, could bypass the hold of the publican on our cultural expressions and could positively add to our deep cultural heritage.

With complete democratic control over our public broadcasting infrastructure it would be possible to promote a much larger portion of original talent and content coming through a much wider music educational programme, raising the standard of our musicians and providing a living wage for those who wish to broaden our cultural horizons. Musicians will have to organise themselves into a union to protect their wages, terms, and conditions.

Music and musicians can become a self-sustaining and vibrant industry, along with the many other artistic forms lacking in funds and support, but only if those involved begin to organise and fight for their position in our society. Opening up a dialogue on this would be a good place to start.★

Can nobody save this child?

Gabriel Rosenstock presents a version in Irish and English of a poem by the famous Urdu poet Ali Sardar Jafri (1913–2000)

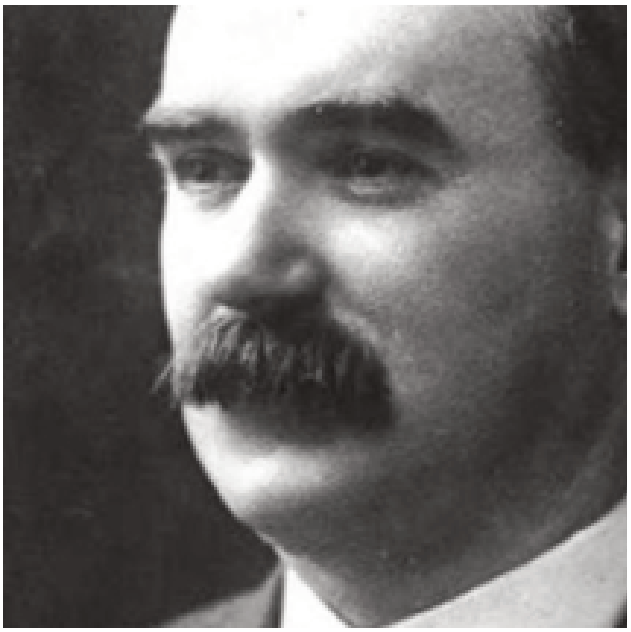
Jafri was a communist poet, writer, critic, and film lyricist. Though born with a silver spoon in his mouth in Uttar Pradesh, he was expelled from university and later imprisoned for his revolutionary views.

Ruainne

Fíonn a mháthair síoda,
Sníomhann a athair cadás.
D'fhág sé dorchadas na broinne
Ar mhaithe le croí dubh botháin.
Nuair a imeoidh sé,
Breosla do na muilte a bheidh ann.
Chun a cholainn gan cháim a bheathú
Cothóidh sé ocras doshásaithe caipitil.
Caithfidh a lámha go fánach bláthanna órga
Agus caithfidh a cholainn a cuid airgid.
Fuil a chroí a lasfaidh na laindéir gheala
I bhfuinneoga bainc.
An páiste seo, nach saonta, nach bídeach
Craos caipitil dó i ndán,
Ina sheasamh is é ag achainí os íseal:
Nach bhfuil éinne in ann mé a shábháil?

A Morsel

His mother weaves silk,
His father spins cotton.
He left the darkness of the womb
For the black heart of a hovel.
When he leaves it,
He will fuel the mills.
To nourish his innocent body
He will feed the insatiable hunger of capital.
His hands will squander flowers of gold
And the body will spend its silver.
The bright burning lamps in bank windows
Will be fuelled by the blood of his heart.
This child, so innocent, so small,
Destined for capital's maw,
Stands pleading silently:
Can nobody save me?



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JAMES CONNOLLY FESTIVAL 2017

Six days that will shake the world!

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Highlights will include Rónán Ó Snodaigh of Kíla for music; An Audience with Big Jim Larkin for theatre, and some wild spoken word at our sister venue, Sin É (Upper Ormond Quay).

We offer a progressive take—but welcome all-comers. Our HQ, as ever, is the New Theatre (East Essex Street).

Programme

Monday 8 May
6pm Festival opening exhibition.
7:30pm First performance of a new play, *Big Jim Larkin in Conversation with Ronan Wilmot.*
Admission: €10.

Tuesday 9 May
8pm Film: *Fanatic Heart—'the story so far of Black '47.'*
Admission: €5.

Wednesday 10 May
7:30pm Political debate. Admission free.
8pm The Left Hook: performances from Calum Baird and Temper-Mental MissElayneous.
Venue: Sin É (14 Upper Ormond Quay).

Thursday 11 May
7:30pm Music night with Mat Callaghan and Yvonne Moore. Admission: €10.

Friday 12 May
7:30pm Play: *Inishfallen Fare Thee Well*, by Seán O'Casey.
Admission €10.

Saturday 13 May
2pm James Connolly Memorial Lecture, 2017.
Guest speaker: Prof. Greg Godels (Zoltan Zigedy).
8pm Music by Rónán Ó Snodaigh of Kíla.
Admission: €15.

Sunday 14 May
3pm Wreath-laying ceremony at grave of James Connolly, Arbour Hill Cemetery.
4pm The Cobblestone (77 North King Street).
Music by Ross Breen and friends.

For tickets and more information on events visit www.jamesconnollyfestival.com.
Information: jamesconnollyfestival@gmail.com.