Socialist Voice

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Communist Party of Ireland
Páirtí Cumannach na hÉireann
Partisan Patriotic Internationalist
Number 144 February 2017 €1.50

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"I'm fundamentally not a big friend of referendums. One always breaks out in a sweat when someone dares to ask the opinion of the people."
Jean-Claude Juncker
(president of EU Commission),
21 June 2016.

Expressway to privatisation

It looks like the Government have their greedy sights on Bus Éireann and the rural public transport system. They have been doing a very good job in their media over the last couple of years, demonising Bus Éireann as a hopeless case and a huge financial burden on the taxpayer. **Jimmy Doran** reports PAGE 2

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ISSN 0791-5217

		Number of coach operators	Departures, 2010 (weekly average)	Departures, 2016 (weekly average)	Growth in seat capacity	Growth in passenger numbers*
N7/M7	**(Dublin–Limerick)**	4	52	100	11%	55%
M8	**(Dublin–Cork)**	3	28	64	128%	60%
M9	**(Dublin–Waterford)**	3	36	56	55%	?

**Source: NTA press statement, 11 January 2017*

Expressway to privatisation

They fail to point out that the financial problems are a direct result of policy decisions to starve Bus Éireann of the financial support needed to provide decent public transport to our citizens living in rural Ireland.

The second part of this government policy is the unrestricted issuing of licences to private operators to operate on the lucrative inter-city motorway routes. These licences are not operated under the same conditions as Bus Éireann, in that they mostly run direct from city to city, with few if any stops, while Bus Éireann has to go through many towns and villages in between.

Yes, there has been a growth in the number of passengers on inter-city buses—up to 60 per cent over the last couple of years—but the seat capacity has been increased by more than 120 per cent. This is unsustainable. The people who travel on these services are pensioners, students, and the sick, along with everyone else who makes up society. This is what public services are all about. They need financial support because they have a huge social value to the community.

Bus Éireann receives only 40 per cent from the exchequer for people with a social welfare travel pass. If they were to receive the full amount it would add another €4½ million to its subvention annually, which would put it on a much better financial footing.

The policy decision to starve public services of the necessary finances, coupled with a free-for-all in deregulated licence-issuing, and the demonising of public services in the media, has become the norm around the globe in the worldwide rush to privatise public services and sell off the people's natural resources.

The table above shows clearly the impact of official policy and its implementation by the National Transport Authority.

The Government will stop at nothing to support big business.

Having several operators competing for your custom with cheap fares will never lead to a better service on high-quality buses at more regular intervals to more destinations. Quite the opposite is what happens, very quickly: multiple operators are bought up by one or two large operators, creating a private monopoly or duopoly. Their only aim is maximum profit for the least investment.

Once the field is cleared, the "inefficient" routes are quickly axed or "streamlined." Next the workers come under attack. Unlike the public sector, these private operators are not too keen on recognising trade unions, so staffing levels are reduced, pay and conditions are slashed, and safety is set at the bare minimum. Large areas of rural Ireland will be left without a public service, and of course fares will rise.

This has been seen time and time again wherever public transport is privatised.

The Government will stop at nothing to support big business. They squandered more than €1 billion on Irish Water to create an income stream for the corporations; but Irish people are getting wise to their deals and their brown envelopes, and we stopped their plans for our water.

Bus Éireann, just like Irish Water, is the scene of a struggle to sell off state assets and privatise our services. And once again the figures don't add up. The latest set of figures from Grant Thornton (another one of the outrageously overpaid firms of consultants) states that Bus Éireann's Expressway service will lose between €5 and €6 million per year and should be shut down immediately, with the loss of 500 jobs. Yet the cost to the exchequer of 500 extra people on the dole would be €5.8 million per year, and that's just in social welfare payments.

The company has now tried to impose cuts of up to 30 per cent on the workers' earnings to make up for the underfunding by the state. This is a direct attack on the workers and their union, as in Dublin Bus and Luas recently.

I don't think the workers will roll over to this blatant attack on them and on the communities they serve. It is not up to the workers to subsidise public transport: that's the duty of the Government.

We were not fooled over water; we won't be fooled over transport. We must stand with the people of rural Ireland and with the Bus Éireann workers and stop this Expressway to privatisation. ★

RTE and alternative facts

Alan Hanlon

Immediately after his inauguration as president of the United States, Donald Trump claimed there were more people at his inauguration than at any previous inauguration. All the evidence contradicted this.

His spokesperson described this Trumpism as an "alternative fact"; the American media described it as a falsehood.

An "alternative fact" is a falsehood. Channel 4 simply called it a lie. RTE, however, described it as "economical with the truth."

It is understandable that RTE might want to equivocate before describing anything as a lie, lest it be sued. However, RTE has a long record of presenting "alternative facts."

It has previously been shown in *Socialist Voice* that from the beginning of the campaign of opposition to the privatisation of water RTE News went from a position of hardly mentioning the biggest public protests (above) since the 1970s or 80s to understating the numbers. It also regurgitated official statements denigrating the protesters and misrepresenting their motives. In effect it showed itself to be an organ of the state.

Far from being balanced, RTE in the main has taken on the role of state propaganda machine. The pursuit of a right-wing, neo-liberal agenda, especially by talk-show hosts, is hardly surprising when you consider that some of these people are paid a massive amount of cash by a company that is loss-making and is largely paid for by taxing the public through licence fees.

Because of this it might be thought that, like other public employees, these RTE "stars" would have a public-service ethos and would be paid public-sector salaries. Far from it!

What is less well known is that many of the RTE stars have set up companies that then contract their services to RTE. In effect, they are self-employed. At the very least these RTE stars should declare their directorships before pontificating that busmen and other workers are overpaid.

Marian Finucane is a typical example. She is a director of her own company, which contracts her services to RTE. According to the most recent figures, her company is paid about €295,000 per year for her two shows at the weekend, amounting to four hours' broadcasting per week.

Here are some examples of the alternative facts from the panellists on her show. All these claims went unchallenged. They claimed that the public service was responsible for the economic crash, because civil servants were being paid more than the state could afford. This is not true. In fact in 2007 the minister for finance was able to boast that he had a surplus. In 2008 this situation was reversed when the next minister for finance decided to underwrite the private debts of individuals and so in effect socialise the debts of a small but influential clique. The consequences for the rest of us are well known.

In the wake of the Garda pay settlement the worthy panellists on the Marian Finucane show latched on to the "Rolls-Royce" pensions in the public sector. One came out with this gem: he had worked in the civil service as a consultant, and some of the people he'd worked with were getting more in pension than they were paid when working.

This is nonsense. Defined-benefit pension schemes work the same way in the private and the public sector. The benefit is defined; therefore if someone has a salary of €50,000 and forty years' service their pension will be €25,000. For this pension to increase to over €50,000 there would have to be pay increases more than double the basic salary. In fact pay was cut in 2010. Even before that, pay increases would not have come close to achieving a doubling of pension.

Nevertheless this type of illogical claim about public-sector pensions is accepted and broadcast without demur.

Donald Trump has been completely underestimated by the media, here and elsewhere. His methodology is fairly straightforward: make a false claim, such as the one about Barack Obama's birth cert, or the number of people at the inauguration, or the number of people who voted for him. The false claims are sound-bites that attract attention, and he uses them to groom his supporters to accept a lowering of standards.

As soon as the bogus claims are refuted he drops them and moves on to the next headline-grabber. However, the bogus claims can enable him to push through executive orders on immigration, voting, etc.

Likewise, in Ireland chat shows on RTE regularly broadcast misinformation about strikers, public servants, or water protesters, using terms such as "militants," "hard left" and so on to prepare the public for some new erosion of values and services, such as the current drive to privatise public transport. ★

A planned health crisis

The headlines scream that once again Ireland is hit by an annual health crisis—that each winter, just around Christmas time, we are hit by a crisis in our A&E departments brought on by elderly bed-blockers and those who refuse to take the flu vaccination, reports **Eoghan M. Ó Néill**

This year a record 540 people were on trolleys. The Government and the private sector came to the rescue by providing private beds, paid for from the public purse.

Why is it that every winter we are hit by a health crisis? And why is it that every winter the crisis is worse than the previous one?

The answers don't lie in "bed-blockers" or in a refusal to get the flu vaccination.

To begin with, the crisis in the health service is not just a winter crisis: it is a permanent crisis that only gets worse during the winter months. Nor is it a uniquely Irish phenomenon but one that is to be found throughout the capitalist world, all of which shares the same common cause: disinvestment in health in preparation for privatisation.

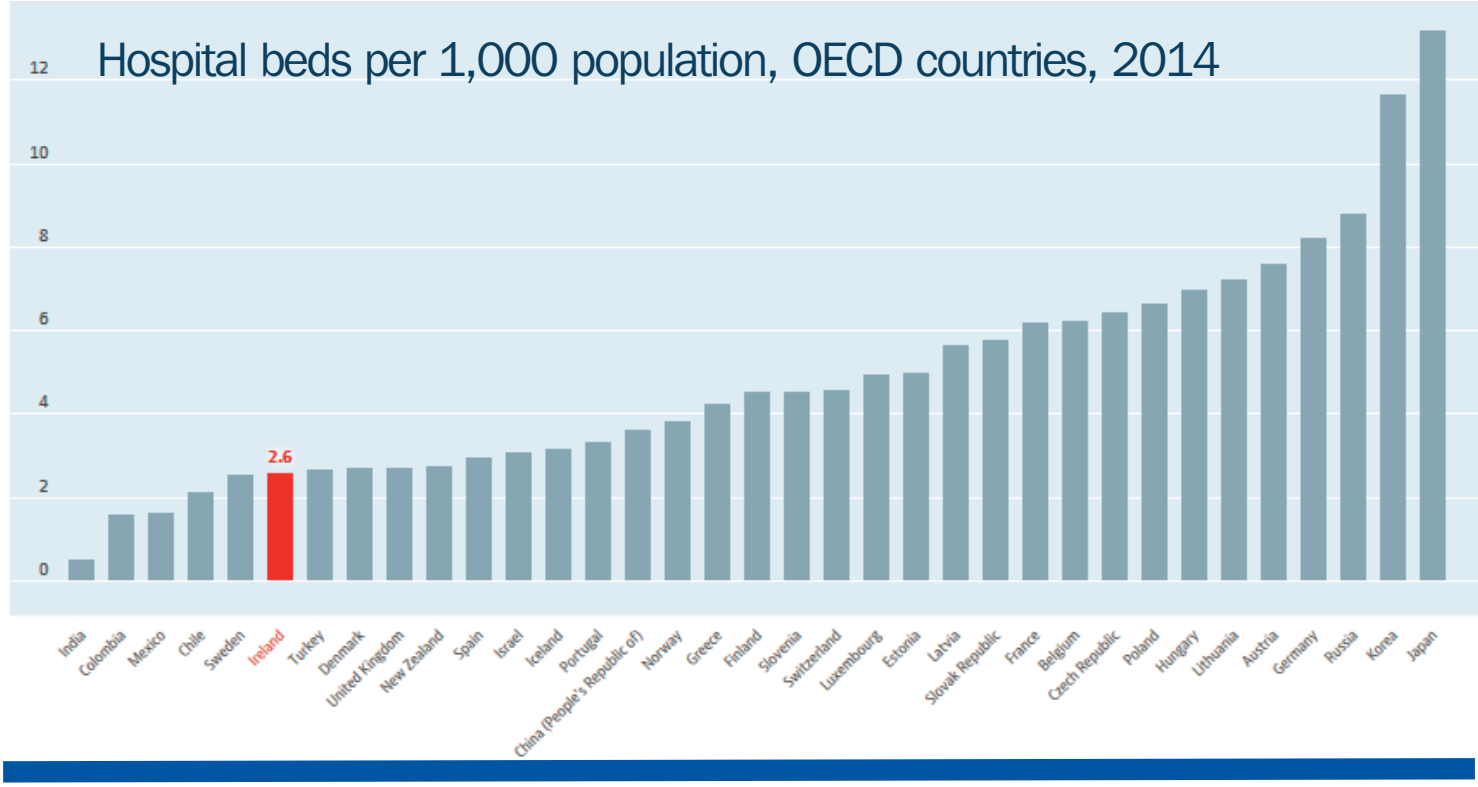
If journalists wanted to know the real cause of our health crisis they need look no further than the statistics produced by Eurostat (the EU statistics agency), the OECD, and the World Health Organisation. There they would find that capitalist governments have been systematically running down public health services for decades while continuing to support and subsidise the private sector.

The health service has not fallen into crisis: government policy has been to drive it into crisis.

Though there have been recent claims that Ireland spends more on health than most EU countries, this is only true if you include the amount spent on the private sector: subventions to private hospitals, health insurance payments, payment for visits to GPs, and prescription charges.

Strip away all these payments to the profit-seeking sector and the figures tell a different story. Data from the Central Statistics Office shows that between 2008 and 2013 spending on public health fell by 3½ per cent, while spending on private health increased by more than 50 per cent. Figures from the OECD show that the number of hospital beds in Ireland has been consistently falling, from 30,834 in 1980 to 11,989 beds in 2014—a loss of 18,845 beds!

In 1980 Ireland had a ratio of 9.03 beds per 1,000 of population; by 2014 this had been reduced to 2.6 per 1,000. Compare this with Greece—a country our government has sneered at. In 1980 Greece had a ratio of only 6.23 hospital beds per 1,000 of population—a figure significantly lower than Ireland's. By 2014, however, the situation had almost reversed, with a ratio of 4.2 hospital beds per 1,000 of population in Greece—almost double that of Ireland. Despite "austerity" and attacks on the Greek economy by the imperialist EU, they have managed to better provide for the health needs of their people than the cloying, obsequious Irish government.



International comparisions

Austria	**1985**	75,168	**2014**	64,815
Belgium	**1985**	91,790	**2015**	69,730
Canada	**1976**	162,234	**2013**	95,530
Czech Rep	**1990**	102,810	**2014**	67,937
Denmark	**1997**	24,538	**2015**	14,380
France	**1997**	507,996	**2014**	410,921
Germany	**1991**	809,737	**2014**	666,337
Greece	**1979**	60,073	**2014**	46,160
Hungary	**2001**	80,665	**2014**	68,910
Ireland	**1980**	30,834	**2014**	11,989
Italy	**1975**	588,103	**2013**	199,474
Portugal	**1990**	40,383	**2014**	34,522
Spain	**1985**	175,910	**2014**	137,938
UK	**2000**	128,834	**2014**	176,323
USA	**1969**	1,616,000	**2013**	914,513

What is happening is not unique to Ireland but is part of a pattern that is evident throughout the capitalist core. Disinvestment in the public health service throughout the capitalist world is preparing the way for a massive move towards privatisation. The trade agreements of CETA and TTIP are designed to further eviscerate public services, such as health and housing, and open them up to privatisation. This is evident in CETA, where the Irish government refused to protect the public health service from privatisation—indeed it refused such protection to all our public services, paving the way for the vulture funds and transnational corporations to sweep in and profit from our public services.This is in line with the international move from public services to commodified, profit-seeking private services.

The table shows the level of disinvestment measured by loss of hospital beds in public hospitals in capitalist OECD countries.

Capitalism seeks to resolve its crisis by opening up new markets. Public services are to be run down by means of government disinvestment and neglect. The private sector—which continues to receive public subsidy—will be heralded as the most efficient model for providing public services.

Transnational corporations will be welcomed as the saviours of our health systems and will make huge profits from those who can afford to pay; those who can't will be left with, at best, a health system that is dysfunctional, overcrowded, and incapable of providing the health service our people deserve and need.

> "Capitalism seeks to resolve its crisis by opening up new markets."

Seems familiar? That's because it's already happening. Our government is neglecting the health needs of our people, putting the health and the lives of our most vulnerable people at risk in order to pursue an ideology of profit over health.

There is an alternative: a socialised public health service, based on need rather than profit. We are witnessing the destruction of our public services in the interests of profit: our public housing, our public health, our public education, our public infrastructure and transport—all are being systematically destroyed to pave the way for profit-seeking vultures.

We need to join up the dots if we are to protect our public services and to expand them. It is not a question of money—Ireland is a rich country—but of having the necessary political will. ★

The ultimate goal of Soviet socialism was to eliminate the essential distinctions between town and country and between mental and manual work, and to convert agricultural labour into a variety of industrial labour, thus strengthening and deepening the worker-peasant alliance writes **Eoghan Ó Néill**

A critical assessment of Soviet agriculture

FAR LEFT
Tractor drivers
Arkady Plastov
LEFT
With men at the front, women gather the harvest, 1941

THE SOVIET Union has many critics—some with just cause, but most of them ideologically driven to oppose the very nature of the system, despite the unprecedented scale of development that unfolded during the seventy-five years of its existence.

In this article I specifically deal with agriculture, the growth rates from 1909 to 1975, and finally the most controversial period of the first five-year plan, which began the drive for collectivisation.

I make no apology for looking at Soviet agriculture from a class viewpoint, specifically a worker's viewpoint. The foundations on which all debate on the Soviet Union is built are ideological. This cannot be ignored, because if I hold to a liberal ideology, the idea of an economic system based on the eradication of private property and private enterprise, and on people serving the common good rather than fulfilling their individual desires, will never be acceptable, no matter how fair, how efficient or how equitable that particular system is. This in turn changes the objective nature of analysis from criticism to propaganda.

All too often we hear the October Revolution being described as a workers' revolution, and little attention is paid to the other side of the alliance: the peasants; and if it is talked about it's all about forced collectivisation, famine, and murder.

From the very first days of the October Revolution, and in the years preceding it, agriculture was just as important as industry for the cause of socialism. Without such an alliance the victory of the October Revolution, and its maintenance for the better part of a century, would have been impossible. This alliance is embodied in its emblem, the hammer and sickle, known the world over.

Of course the revolution was led by the working class and its vanguard, the Bolsheviks, but Lenin understood the necessity of an alliance with the peasants, who in 1917 made up four-fifths of the Russian population, and half of whom lived below subsistence level. The peasants, just like the workers, had nothing to lose but their chains. Without such an alliance, socialising the basic means of production could not be completed; so by issuing the decree in November 1917 that all private land be handed over to the nation and its tillers, the Bolsheviks in power assured the peasantry of their place in the revolutionary alliance.

Turning what was small-scale, unskilled, isolated and low-tech agricultural units (approximately 25 million small peasant households) into an agri-industrial complex was brought about by the often criticised and all too often misunderstood system of collective and state farms.

State farms were state-run socialist agricultural enterprises in which the basic means of production and the resultant agricultural products were owned by the state. Collective farms were co-operatives of working peasants, who voluntarily pooled their efforts and resources to form large-scale farms based on socialised means of production and collective labour.

In the collective farm the collective had to deliver a fixed quota to the state. Everything it produced above this quota was essentially a profit. The collectives could sell this surplus product, and the proceeds would be distributed among the collective's workers.

The collectivisation policy was the basis of the first five-year plan: to secure the physical needs of society along the socialist path of public ownership and planning. This policy was also the beginning of the process of turning the agricultural worker into an industrial worker, through the mechanisation of the production of farm products.

Soviet governments placed great importance on agrarian policy. Their ultimate goal was to eliminate the essential distinctions between town and country and between mental and manual work, and to convert agricultural labour into a variety of industrial labour, thus strengthening and deepening the worker-peasant alliance.

Some of the hardships and problems associated with the policy of forced collectivisation are discussed below; but to give a sense of the expansion of agriculture it is important to look at some of the indicators of output from the years 1909 to 1975. Soviet agriculture was more productive, using less labour, than Tsarist Russia. The number of workers engaged in agriculture fell by 1.7 million, yet the collective and state farms produced 240 per cent more than in the best agricultural year before the Revolution, as table 1 shows. (All tables are taken from *Soviet Union: Political and Economic Reference Book,* 1975.)

1 Gross agricultural output, annual averages, in 1965 prices

	Million Rubles
1909–1913	26,100
1936–1940	29,800
1961–1965	66,300
1971–1974	91,100

CONTINUED OVERLEAF

2 Gross agricultural output, annual averages, in 1965 prices

	1909/ 1913	1936/ 1940	1961/ 1965	1971/ 1974	% change, 1909–1974
Grain	72.5	77.4	130.3	191.9	165%
Cotton	0.68	2.5	4.99	7.62	1,021%
Sugar beet	10.1	17.1	59.2	78.4	676%
Sunflower seed	0.75	1.79	5.07	6.22	729%
Potatoes	30.6	49.4	81.6	90.1	194%
Vegetables	5.5	10.5	16.9	22.9	316%

3 Annual average yield per hectare (kg)

	1909/ 1913	1936/ 1940	1961/ 1965	1971/ 1974	% change, 1909–1974
Grain	690	760	1,020	1,560	126%
Cotton	1,300	1,200	2,060	2,740	111%
Sugar beet	15,000	14,300	16,500	22,600	51%
Sunflower seed	760	550	1,120	1,350	78%
Potatoes	7,800	7,100	9,400	11,300	45%
Vegetables	8,400	7,600	11,600	13,900	65%

Annual growth between 1951 and 1975 was 3.4 per cent, compared with 1.7 per cent in the United States. The output in crop farming clearly shows the efficiency with which agricultural labour continued to evolve. This was done by the large-scale development, distribution and advancement of technology, machinery and equipment in the production and reproduction of crop farming and livestock breeding—essential given the fact that between 1917 and 1975 the Soviet population increased by more than 90 million (despite the imperialist invasions after the First World War and more than 20 million Soviet sacrifices in the Second World War).

It must also be stated that this was not a result of an increase in the geographical size of the Soviet Union (though this counts for some change): the main reason for growth, especially in the later years, was the intensification and industrialisation of agriculture that produced continuously increasing yields.

Between 1913 and 1975 the output of livestock products went up by 250 per cent; again a large part of this increase was due to livestock productivity rather than expansion. The Soviet Union's share of world milk output increased from 13 per cent in 1940 to 21 per cent in 1973, producing and supplying a fifth of the world's milk and butter needs.

Clearly, without the October Revolution and the building of the first socialist state, Russia and the other socialist republics could not have developed at such a rate; and the cornerstone on which all industry and economic growth is built is agriculture. Prof. Robert Allen states:

> If Russian women had not been educated or industrialisation had been slower, then the USSR would have had a late fertility transition (as in India) or no fertility transition (as in Pakistan). Simulation of these possibilities shows that the population would have reached one billion in 1989 . . . A population expansion of that order would surely have cut the growth in per capita GDP.

Of course this article is not a blind endorsement of every policy of the Soviet Union, but it tries to show what socialising the means of production did for agriculture and, by extension, for the development of the Soviet Union, starting from an underdeveloped base. It would be wrong to brush aside the problems that resulted from this policy, but it would also be negligent as well as divisive not to put this policy in its wider global and historical context, from which these policies had to develop at the stage and at the rate at which they did.

The first fact of note is that the Soviet state was born from the womb of the Russian Tsarist state—a predominantly underdeveloped agrarian and small-scale industrial country. The social dynamics and class forces did not disappear overnight, just because the Revolution was successful.

Not all peasants were equal. There was a stratum of the peasantry who were not subsistence farmers, the "kulaks," a petit-bourgeois element inherited from the Tsarist period. They became a subversive and destructive element in the countryside, as they were being eliminated as a class, through high taxes and being subsumed in collective and state farms, causing many problems for the new socialist state.

Together with the need to feed the rapidly expanding urban work force, the constant threat of foreign invasion, the inability to secure foreign loans and therefore the need to use agricultural surpluses for sale to foreign markets to help the rapid growth of industrialisation, this led to a rapid collectivisation policy that, under more favourable circumstances, would not have to be pursued.

The hardships endured by those living in the countryside, including episodes of famine in parts of Ukraine in 1932–33, cannot be attributed personally to Stalin, as so many do. Prof. Stephen Wheatcroft argues that there was a range of factors, including the accelerating rate of growth in the population, urbanisation, the migration of large numbers of predominantly male peasants from agricultural areas to the towns, new inter-regional developments within the Soviet Union, the quest for grain procurements for export, and natural problems affecting food supplies, especially the freezing winters of 1928 and 1929 and the severe drought of 1931 (in the historical context of one serious drought every ten or eleven years in the most productive agricultural zones). These would all have placed a large and increasing strain on the food system, which in turn led to episodes of famine.

Others, such as Anna Louise Strong, explain that

> there was a serious grain shortage in the 1932 harvest due chiefly to inefficiencies of the organisational period of the new large-scale mechanised farming among peasants unaccustomed to machines. To this was added sabotage by dispossessed kulaks, the leaving of the farms by 11 million workers who went to new industries, the cumulative effect of the world crisis in depressing the value of Soviet farm exports, and a drought in five basic grain regions in 1931.

This was used as propaganda by exiled Ukrainian

▲ *Collective Farm Festival* 1937
Arkady Plastov
LEFT
Propaganda poster

nationalist, church and fascist forces against the Soviet Union.

That severe hardship and hunger were widespread cannot be denied. Some of the factors lay in the hands of Soviet policy-makers, while others were outside their control; but their trajectory and the problems of that particular period can just as much be attributed to the Western countries' aggressive and contemptuous stance towards the fledgling socialist state. Joseph Ball also argues that

> the underlying cause of the famine however was under-development. Russia suffered from repeated famines in its history for precisely this reason . . . By industrialising under Stalin, the Soviet Union was able to lift the spectre of famine from the Soviet people. If a "culprit" for the famine of the 1930s really needs to be found, then perhaps it should be found in the old, moribund Tsarist system that prevented Russia from copying the economic success of countries like the UK and USA in the hundred and fifty years or so prior to 1917.

Foreign aggression forced the hand of the Soviet government, leading to the policy of rapid industrialisation and forced collectivisation, which Stalin summed up in his statement: "We are fifty or a hundred years behind the advanced countries. We must make up this gap in ten years. Either we do it or they will crush us." This foresight indeed not only saved the Soviet Union from annihilation but saved the world from a global fascist hegemony. Once the Soviet Union developed sufficiently, famine was no longer a threat.

Academics such as Prof. Robert Allen and Prof. Stephen Wheatcroft (quoted above) have reassessed the validity and the narrative surrounding the period of the first five-year plan. Wheatcroft concludes that

> there is no basis to argue that the Soviet government purposefully caused a famine in the countryside . . . That the authorities had purposefully provoked these famines to attack Ukrainian Nationalism or the Kulaks does not make sense in the complex manner in which these crises unfolded, and the attempts earlier to exclude Ukraine from the worst of the stress.

Robert Allen states:

> Recent research shows that the standard of living also increased briskly. Calories are the most basic dimension of the standard of living, and their consumption was higher in the late 1930s than in the 1920s . . . By the late 1930s, the recovery of agriculture increased calorie availability to 2,900 per day—a significant increase over the late 1920s. The food situation during the Second World War was severe, but by 1970 calorie consumption rose to 3,400, which was on a par with western Europe.

Both writers are critical of Soviet policies, Robert Allen asserting that collectivisation did not reap the high rewards it promised and that the hardships endured were not necessary if the policy-makers had kept to the earlier New Economic Policy, whereby the state allowed a form of free market and capitalism—all subject to state control—while socialised state enterprises were to operate on a profit basis.

This argument is not new. It was the subject of fierce debates within the Soviet Union in the 1920s, which then formed the basis of the first five-year plan. In fact we could define the problems and the forces within the communist, socialist and workers' movements along the lines of the dispute between those pursuing a "socialist road"—moving away from commodity production and profit motive towards a planned economy of allocation and subsidies for innovation—and those pursuing a "capitalist road"—moving towards commodity production and the profit motive for innovation and away from a planned economy.

This theme will need to be expanded upon in further articles, because when we are evaluating the achievements and the mistakes of the Soviet Union, with a view to learning from them and informing ourselves for the future, we can see that diversions in political ideology within the Communist Party of the Soviet Union played an enormous role in the policies that led to stagnation, criticisms, capitulation and the eventual dismantling of the USSR. ★

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Sinn Féin faces a daunting task

Sinn Féin's newly appointed leader in the North, Michelle O'Neill, faces a daunting task as she begins to guide her party during a period of uncertainty in the six counties. **Tommy McKearney** reports

NOTWITHSTANDING THE fact that she is a politician of considerable experience and ability as outgoing minister for health in the Stormont Assembly, she faces several difficult challenges. Not only has she a short preparatory period before leading the party into an election in early March but she will be faced immediately thereafter with what are bound to be fraught negotiations with the DUP over the establishment of an Executive—and that may prove to be the easy bit.

The fundamental problem facing all political parties in Northern Ireland is not restoring the institutions but what to do with a failed political entity, locked helplessly within the United Kingdom.

Although there may be some small degree of electoral slippage for both major parties, Sinn Féin and the DUP are likely to remain the two largest groups in the Assembly. Thanks to the limited ability of the Stormont opposition, not to mention the absence of a visible alternative beyond that institution, the previous coalition partners will emerge as the only contenders for executive office.

Whatever the electoral tally may show, there is undoubtedly a wide gap to be bridged if an Executive is to be formed in the weeks following 2 March. Sinn Féin has been stung by criticism from its own supporters for its inept and often contradictory early-days handling of the "cash for ash" scandal. The party was reluctant to bring down the Assembly and felt angry when forced to do so and thus trigger an election. Michelle O'Neill will be obliged, therefore, to wring some noticeable concessions from the DUP before re-entering coalition.

Arlene Foster, on the other hand, has practically staked her reputation on acting tough with Sinn Féin while simultaneously rejecting any responsibility whatsoever for the RHI

fiasco. This indicates the likelihood of stalemate, followed by direct rule, for some months at least.

There was a time in the not too distant past when both London and Dublin would have reacted with some alarm to the prospect of relations between Northern Ireland's political parties breaking down. Not any longer, though. Put bluntly, there is virtually no prospect of this rupture in the Assembly leading to widespread armed activity, and at any rate the Irish and British governments are now wrestling with what both consider the much more important issue of Brexit.

Consequently, the quarrelsome Northern politicians will be left on the back burner until Theresa May finds time to send someone in to force through a settlement.

No doubt an arrangement of sorts will be reached sooner or later. Both parties are acutely aware of what may happen when local political institutions are put in cold storage. Without the structures presented by the existence of a devolved administration and the public platform this provides, electoral parties tend to stagnate and even wither. Sinn Féin and the DUP are well aware of what happened to the Ulster Unionist Party and the SDLP as a result of the prolonged period of direct rule during the 1980s.

Both parties, however, are caught in a bind. Stormont as now constituted allows them to exert a certain amount of influence but grants no real power. The recent ruling by Britain's Supreme Court in relation to article 50 of the Treaty on European Union—i.e. Brexit—made this painfully clear when it "unanimously ruled that devolved administrations did not need to be consulted and did not have a right to veto Article 50 . . ." It might well have added that, deprived, as it is, of fiscal and political authority, this applies to all other matters of significance coming before the Assembly.

Making matters worse is the fact that those who have administered the six counties over the past ten years have no concrete plan for improving the situation. On the contrary, they have found themselves in the unenviable position of having to manage their responsibilities within parameters dictated by governments in London.

How impoverished their response to this has been is evidenced by feeble initiatives such as the proposed reduction in corporation tax and appeals by the first and deputy first ministers to foreign transnationals to come and exploit the North's low-wage economy.

Moreover, it now appears that the absence of meaningful control over the economy may have played a significant part in the RHI (or "cash for ash") scandal. Approximately 45 per cent of this grant was allocated to the poultry industry.[1] An impartial observer could be forgiven for thinking that this was, in effect, a disguised subsidy for a low-tech industry that, unsupported, might easily have been undermined by competition from abroad.

"Unable to chart its own course, Northern Ireland is reduced to operating an opportunist economic policy, regulated and contaminated through the mean practising of sectarian politics."

Interestingly, the scheme's attraction for poultry farmers was reported by the *News Letter* as far back as August 2014,[2] a fact that may require answers from the then minister for agriculture, Michelle O'Neill.

Whatever conclusion will eventually be drawn from inquiries into this affair, it exposes inherent weaknesses in Stormont's political and economic structures. The northern political entity is a peripheral region of the United Kingdom, locked in to London's political and economic orbit. Unable to chart its own course, Northern Ireland is reduced to operating an opportunist economic policy, regulated and contaminated through the mean practising of sectarian politics.

Therefore, while the Assembly and the Executive may eventually be restored, they will continue to huff and puff and do little to improve the dismal lot of the region's working class.

As with so many other states failed by a colonial past and contemporary capitalism, the North needs a transformative strategy. This requires frankness, honesty, and a willingness to contemplate options that will not please everyone. The northern state, as now constituted, is a failure and has to be replaced. That such a change will come about is no longer in doubt. The fall-out from Brexit, Scottish disenchantment with London and changing demographics are among the factors that guarantee this.

Simply waiting for events to take their course, however, is not an option in the volatile political arena that is Northern Ireland. The only responsible approach is to make sure that change happens under the best possible conditions and with maximum support from within the working class. To do so it will be necessary to introduce a programme that demonstrates (even if it cannot be immediately implemented) a clear and reasonable path towards a new and better society. Core issues detrimentally affecting working-class communities have to be given priority and solutions identified over the short, medium and long term.

It doesn't take long to list problem areas that would form the basis of a transformative programme. Just as in the Republic, there is a homeless and rental-housing crisis in the North that can only be addressed by a comprehensive public housing strategy. The creeping privatisation of the National Health Service has to be halted and rolled back. Workers' rights need defining, asserting, and defending. Adequate care for the aged must be made a priority. And the greatest stain of all—ubiquitous food banks in 21st-century Northern Ireland[3]—must be addressed and the need for them ended for all time.

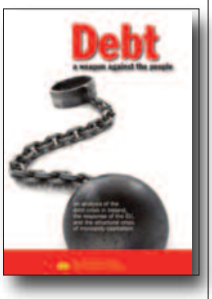
To implement such a strategy it will be necessary to build a movement around progressive forces and identify a methodology for engaging with the situation. Let's be honest: this won't be easy, but the alternative is to do nothing while tolerating existing failure, as we wait for the situation to inevitably get worse.

As socialists, however, we believe we can succeed in this endeavour, because we always exercise "optimism of the will," even in the North of Ireland. ★

1 Conor Macauley, "RHI scandal: Locations of RHI boilers revealed to BBC," BBC News, 17 January 2017 (http://bbc.in/2k5EUju).

2 Future of farming appears to be "Brites," *Farming Life*, 22 August 2014 (http://bit.ly/2kBd52i).

3 Just one example: "Giving generously to food bank," *Mid-Ulster Mail*, 15 December 2016 (http://bit.ly/2ksBZo9)



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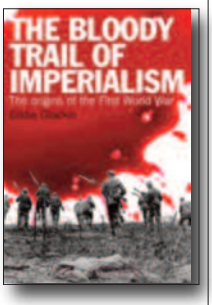

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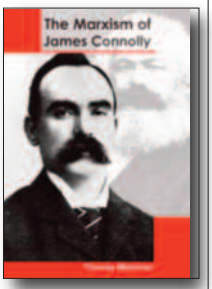

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The left must reclaim national sovereignty

Graham Harrington

WITH THE rise of the far right in Europe and elsewhere, the left faces a stiff challenge. The former base areas of Labour and Socialist Parties are now seeing increased votes for parties such as the National Front in France, UKIP in Britain, Golden Dawn in Greece, and the Austrian Freedom Party. The election of Donald Trump in the United States has also galvanised the far right.

It is clear that, despite the different environments in which far-right forces are emerging, there is a pattern. While the continuing crisis of capitalism plays a significant role, perhaps the main reason is the failure of the left to organise sufficiently to provide an alternative.

First of all, what is the "left"? It is a term often used but nowadays is less understood.

Historically, the "left" refers to the organised movement of those who labour for a living, economically organised in trade unions and politically organised in socialist or labour parties. The left has been, by its nature, anti-capitalist and broadly socialist, favouring the public ownership of natural resources and the main industries. It has stood for job security, high wages, and social equality between male and female workers.

Ideologically the left has stood for collective values and for struggle as the main method of social progress, as well as for human rights and self-determination. In various countries the left has had strong communist involvement, with the main difference between communists and the social-democratic left being that the former favour a socialist transformation of society through workers taking control of the state apparatus, as happened in Russia in 1917, while social democrats favour a gradual improvement of life for workers under a supposed better and fairer capitalism.

In the past few decades the left has, by and large, abandoned these core concepts. It supported the creation of a "social Europe," believing that the emergence of European political and economic union would put manners on the various capitalist governments. It fell for the myth that the European Union protected workers' rights, ignoring the Laval and Viking cases as well as the high levels of unemployment, especially youth unemployment, throughout the euro zone.

The EU has been a pioneer of the policies that have led to the rise of the "precariat"—a name given to the growing number of primarily young people forced to earn a precarious living from casual employment, with poor wages, little job security, and no pension.

While this argument is very important, it is also necessary to stress the anti-democratic nature of the European Union, with the unelected Commission in Brussels, and the again unelected mandarins in the EU Central Bank, deciding a one-size-fits-all policy for the people of the member-states, which, of course, all have very different economies and cultures.

While the left has attempted to organise against the austerity policies of the EU and national governments, it has become largely toothless through its accommodation with the EU. The misunderstanding of the uneven development of capitalism means that the contradictions between the EU's core and periphery go unchallenged. This has led to revolt by working-class people, largely in the shape of the votes for populist parties, including the far right in some countries, which have increased in popularity merely by adopting formerly social-democratic demands from the 1970s and 80s and

Mental health: Lessons from Cuba

David Hartery

WHEN ATTEMPTING to create a comparison between the Irish and Cuban health systems' attitudes to the treatment of mental illness, it's important to remember that there is a structural and a philosophical difference between the two that is more than just about how a communist and a neo-liberal system is funded.

In attempting to create a communist health system we must look at how Cuba categorises illness, and not fall victim to Cartesian notions of sickness, separating mind and body.

Like all the other elements of Cuba's health system, Cuba attempts to deal with mental health issues primarily through prevention and community care. While this may seem intuitively a better focus for a health system, this care approach requires a level of co-ordination and co-operation that is anathema to an individualised and atomised system of care, as is the model that the Irish system is increasingly tending towards.

The backbone of the Cuban system is its primary care system. Integrated in communities, these holistic care teams often visit patients at home, especially high-risk patients, to ensure that they're given the correct information to live healthily and also to check in for the early signs of illness.

The mental health element of these check-ups goes hand in hand with the physical check-ups. This is an active and interventionist approach, one that places a large premium on making patients feel supported within their communities, minimising their risk of progressing to in-patient care. The point of such intervention is to reduce cost but also to ensure that patients are given the tools to take care of themselves. In the individualist neo-liberal system we are to be our own diagnostician and, increasingly, our own physician.

Above the primary care facilities there are of course hospitals and institutional care facilities. However, even here mental health is not seen as different from physical health. Psychology and psychiatry are integrated in the care of all patients,

LEFT
European far-right leaders in conclave

by opposing the EU.

Most dramatically, these revolts led to Brexit. However, rather than understand the reasons for Brexit the left—with notable exceptions—has still not broken from its support for the EU. Instead those who voted to leave the EU are regarded as lumpen, deranged, misled, and racists. By continuing with this narrative the left is only further disconnecting itself from those who are being led astray by the far right.

Working-class politics is about far more than academic debates: it is about the needs and desires of our class, which in this age include the demand for national sovereignty against the further concentration of capital.

The example of what can be done when national sovereignty is asserted can be seen in Iceland—not a member of the EU. Iceland reclaimed its sovereignty by repudiating its bankers' debt rather than requesting a bail-out from the International Monetary Fund, as the Irish state did. It has now recovered from its crisis and is showing high growth rates as a result of the capital controls its government has adopted. Meanwhile in Ireland we face a worsening homelessness crisis brought about by the state and its housing policy, in accordance with EU diktat, a worsening health crisis, in accordance with EU diktat, and potential privatisation of water—surprise, surprise, in accordance with EU diktat.

We have little ability to change EU policy, with the 26 counties having only 1 per cent of the vote on the EU Council. However, the way the Irish compradors have conducted themselves has shown the importance of the nation-state as an entity. The EU could not pass through these policies without the willingness of national governments to follow through on them. For this reason the left in Ireland has a chance to redeem itself, by pledging to reclaim national sovereignty and democracy at the national level, but only if it is willing to challenge the EU at its core.

The EU is growing increasingly militarised, with armed police and even soldiers on the streets of many European cities, with operations such as *"Strade Secure"* (safe streets) in Italy meaning that there is in effect a sort of subtle martial law.

The expressed desire of the southern state in Ireland is to work closely with the other EU states on military partnership, with EU officials openly supporting calls for a united European army, almost certainly within NATO.

The left in Ireland can counter this by supporting the call from the likes of Shannon Watch to remove the use of Shannon Airport as a de facto US military base. However, the left must go further and show that this is part of a broader American strategy within the EU, with Poland and Latvia also being used for militarist purposes.

Largely, the attitude of the Irish left to the national question is that it is to be ignored, lest it rock the boat; the national question has been settled since the Belfast Agreement and the end of the armed conflict. The recent collapse of the northern Assembly shows that the northern statelet is in perpetual crisis. As the CPI and others have maintained, the southern and northern states have both failed to meet the needs of the people. The answer does not lie in a Stormont for all or a Leinster House for all: what is needed is a united, independent and socialist republic. This has been the basic position since the founding of Connolly's Irish Socialist Republican Party in 1896.

Despite this, some elements on the Irish left support the presence in Ireland of British political parties, ostensibly on the left. This ignores the words of Connolly, in his famous dispute with the "labour unionist" William Walker, when he declared that

> the banner under which it seeks to rally us is not the sacred banner of true Internationalism, but is instead the shamefaced flag of a bastard Imperialism! . . .
>
> Given the formation of a United Socialist Party in Ireland, and, guided and helped by such a Party, a Labour Party on Irish soil, controlled from within Ireland, thus the necessary and inevitable incidents of the electoral struggles of such a Party against the Irish political capitalist parties will teach Socialism and Internationalism to the Irish workers better than a million speeches.

With Brexit, the prospect of a united Ireland is on the agenda, with even some southern government ministers mentioning it. Here also lies a vital strategic prospect for the left, for the demand must not be for a united Ireland run by the same landlords and within the EU but for an independent republic. Ireland was united before, but under the British empire! ★

particularly in the case of cancer or other illnesses with a heavy psychic toll. Physicians are trained alongside psychologists and other specialities from their first year in university to foster integration and interdependence. This is extremely different from our neo-liberal system, where health is departmentalised and mental health is increasingly exceptionalised.

Driving the exceptionalism of mental health is the question of resources. As access to health becomes ever more difficult for the majority of people in advanced capitalist countries, cheap alternatives to care are more and more popular. Think of it: a heavily publicised drive to improve mental health is much cheaper than a new oncology ward for a public hospital. Then, if there is no improvement in outcome for patients, it can be blamed on the fact that stigma still exists, or that patients didn't treat themselves well enough.

That is the crux of Ireland's mental health system, as now constituted. Primary care is atomised, often delegated to the charity sector or absent altogether. Advice like "Have a cup of tea and a talk" is seen as a substitute for proper public expenditure on health. By separating mental health from physical health and deciding to concentrate on improving "mental health," the government can simultaneously provide cover for systemic underinvestment in the entire health system. By being seen to take action on mental health, it can then not take action on health.

Cuba's mental health system is not perfect. Suicide rates are high for its population. Because of the embargo there is a difficulty in obtaining psychiatric medication, which, while perhaps over-prescribed in capitalist counties, has definite therapeutic value. However, by treating health holistically—and caring for patients within their communities—Cuba has a mental health system far in advance of similar-sized countries. Their priority on aggressive early intervention and caring for the whole patient is something that Ireland should model itself upon.

After the revolution, the lengths taken to include mental health in the wider public health framework is something that should be studied by anyone striving for a socialist health system. ★

How do we see our history?

Seán Edwards

THE LITTLE girl Mafalda is the creation of the Argentine cartoonist Quino (Joaquín Salvador Lavado) over fifty years ago. Mafalda, Susanita and their pals are noted for innocently raising serious questions, like this one. How do we study history? How do we commemorate historical events? The centenary of the Easter Rising last year showed how contentious a political question this can be.

Looking back, we can see a courageous rebellion, unfortunately violent (in the middle of a war!); but this all belongs in the past, and haven't we a lovely little state now, a grand little country to do business in?

Looking forward, we can see that the issues of independence and sovereignty have not gone away, and the blows struck a century ago can continue to inspire us today. The CPI used the centenary to emphasise the continuing relevance of the teaching of James Connolly.

The centenary of the Russian Revolution will be even more hotly contested. The establishment and its embedded journalists and academics will be most anxious to demonstrate that there is no alternative to capitalism. They claim to have buried socialism. Yet, as they have no solution to the current crisis of capitalism, maybe they are not so sure, so they must shout all the louder.

A serious study of the Revolution and the experience of socialism in the twentieth century shows precisely the opposite: that there is another way for humanity. The road towards the liberation of the working people of the world has proved a hard road to follow; it remains the only road. Rosa Luxemburg famously posed the question "socialism or barbarism?"—more relevant, more urgent than ever, that is if humanity survives.

So, socialists will justly take pride in the Russian Revolution, when workers took power into their own hands. It remains a beacon for all who fight for the liberation of humanity.

This month the eightieth anniversary of the Battle of Jarama will be commemorated in Madrid, with special reference to the International Brigades, who came from many different countries to defend the Spanish Republic from fascism.

The International Brigades provide a continuing and much-needed example of solidarity with people in the front line of the struggle against reaction and oppression.

The defeat of the Second Republic was a terrible tragedy for the Spanish people, from which they have not fully recovered, partly because of a reluctance to confront their history. The purpose of the commemoration is to bring this history to light and to learn from it. Look at the condition of Spain today, with its insoluble crisis, with its austerity policies imposed on working people, with its absurd monarchy. It is time for the Spanish people to consider the establishment of a Third Republic.

Crisis produces monsters, as Gramsci said. Fascism arose out of the crisis of the twenties and thirties. And how did the "democracies" react then? They tried to use fascism—witness Churchill's letter to Mussolini in 1927: "If I had been an Italian I am sure I would have been entirely with you from the beginning to the end of your victorious struggle against the bestial appetites and passions of Leninism."

So when Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany provided troops to help Franco overwhelm the Spanish Republic, Britain and France stood back, in the name of "non-intervention," in practice obstructing the defence of the Republic and impeding the volunteers for the International Brigades.

The present crisis produces monsters also. The best-known of these are Al-Qa'ida and the "Islamic State." It is almost forgotten that these had their genesis in the plans of the United States and its allies for "regime change" in Afghanistan, which at the time had a progressive secular government, supported by the Soviet Union. They recruited the lowest, most backward elements who purported to act in the name of Islam, and provided them with guns and money.

It is true that the Islamists have bitten the hand that fed them, in New York, Paris, London, and Madrid. Yet Zbigniew Brzezinski, the architect of this policy, regarded "a few irate Muslims" as a price worth paying.

The policy of using the jihadists continues. It is not a new policy: even in the aftermath of the Second World War the West took in Nazi collaborators from Croatia and Ukraine, nursed them and kept them and their organisations for decades, in case they might come in useful some time.

Perhaps Quino's little girls are fortunate to have any lessons in history at all, and to be able to criticise them. History is taught less and less, and where it is taught it is more often than not trivialised, taken out of context, reduced to personalities, the posthumous psychoanalysis of political leaders or, even worse, to good guys and bad guys.

Yet an understanding of history is vital for human progress, most especially for the working class and for socialists. Commemorations are occasions for deepening our understanding of our history—not out of nostalgia or obsession with the past but to comprehend the present and to look forward.

Mafalda and Susanita tell us that we cannot understand our history without looking forward. Neither can we look forward without understanding our history. ★

Speaking bluntly

Gabriel Rosenstock introduces and translates a poem by Sukirtharani

The poem "I Speak Up Bluntly" was written in Tamil, one of the oldest literary languages in the world. Sukirtharani is a contemporary Dalit poet (the term that has replaced "Untouchable"). She and other Dalit poets have shown great courage and eloquence in their struggle for equality and parity of esteem in a country that is as riddled with the caste system as Britain is—and indeed parts of our own country—with class divisions.

The Dalit struggle is being expressed in cutting-edge poetry today, but you have to ask yourself, what is new?

Another Tamil poet, Sivavakkiyar, who flourished some time before the tenth century, asks what's the difference between a Paraichi (or Pariah) woman and a Panathi (Brahmin) or upper-class woman:

When you say Paraichi or Panathi—what do you mean?
Is it marked in their flesh, skin and bone?
Conjugal pleasure of a Paraichi or a Panathi, does it differ? Paraichi and a Panathi differ only in the mind!

Labhraím amach go Neamhbhalbh

Chuireas an ruaig ar na préacháin
is d'fheannas an bhó.
Im' sheasamh ar feadh i bhfad, ag fanacht
go n-íosfainn farasbarr an bhaile—
ag maíomh ansin gur itheas rís the úrdhéanta.
Nuair a chonac m'athair ar an tsráid
an druma leathair crochta dá mhuineál,
d'iompaíos m'aghaidh uaidh
is shiúlas thairis.
Toisc nach ndéarfainn cén jab
a bhí ag m'athair, cén teacht isteach a bhí aige,
bhuail an múinteoir mé.
Shuíos liom féin ar an gcúlbhinse
gan chara gan chompánach, ag gol
gan fhios don saol.
Ach anois
má chuireann éinne ceist orm
labhraím amach go neamhbhalbh—
is Íochtarán mé.

I Speak Up Bluntly

I shooed away crows
while flaying dead cows of their skin.
Stood for hours, waiting
to eat the town's leavings—
then boasted that I ate hot, freshly cooked rice.
When I saw my father in the street
the leather drum strung from his neck,
I turned my face away
and passed him by.
Because I wouldn't reveal
my father's job, his income,
the teacher hit me.
Friendless, I sat alone
on the back bench, weeping,
though no-one knew.
But now
if anyone asks me
I speak up bluntly:
I am a Paraichi.

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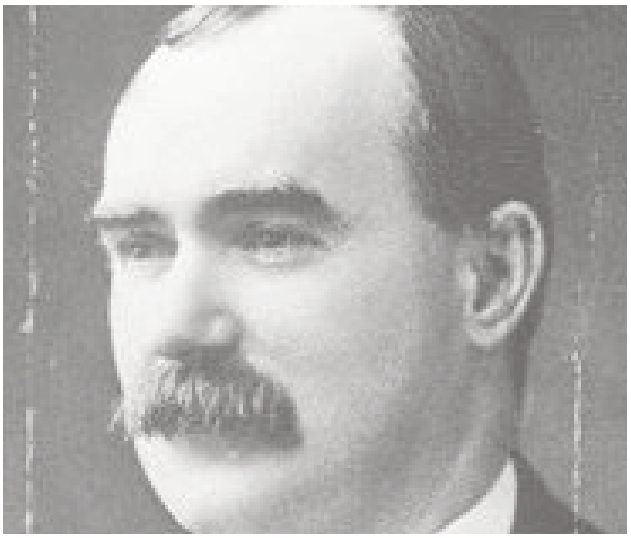

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I, Daniel Blake

Jenny Farrell

VERY FEW contemporary artists put working people and the unemployed, their raw treatment by society and their heroic attempts at fightback, centre stage as consistently as Ken Loach and Paul Laverty. Indeed there are few films—or art in general—in which working people can recognise themselves or their actual lives.

This life experience is simply ignored by the arts. Instead mainstream art presents middle-class people living in comfortable or even luxurious accommodation, faced with relationship crises or other issues that do not question the nature of society. Seldom do we see films, or read books, that explore the innately inhuman character of the neo-liberal capitalist world we live in.

Over a span of fifty years Ken Loach has championed the cause of the working class in his films, with singular success. His most recent film, I, Daniel Blake, his second after The Wind that Shakes the Barley, won the Palme d'Or at Cannes. It is indicative of the value of Galway's decoration as UNESCO City of Film, and its aspiring status as City of Culture, 2020, that this film was not screened there.

I, Daniel Blake has that documentary feel that is a hallmark of many of Loach's films. Britain, in this age of austerity, is shown to be Dickensian without Dickens's sentimental hope for reform.

It's a depiction of a 21st-century poorhouse, run by a "social benefits" system out to deter and crush, "protecting" only the most deserving and compliant of the poor.

Disembodied, computer-like "decision-makers" interrogate Daniel Blake after long waits "on hold" on the telephone, following set questions that exclude interaction with the respondent. This Kafkaesque bureaucracy pronounces Blake ineligible for sickness benefit and a young mother not entitled to financial support—her penalty for challenging the authorities. Both characters are driven into freezing living conditions and near-starvation.

This faceless and inhuman system is purposefully inefficient, deliberately high-and-mighty, its procedures designed to intimidate and humiliate the poor. Protest against the power of these authorities to impoverish absolutely leads to desperate scenes in the "social welfare" office, resulting in further sanctions and punishments. Communication about real lives and problems is impossible, thanks to to rigid regulations and procedures. These include superficial courtesy and meaningless bureaucratic phraseology, which specifically forbids human solidarity. Where this leads to protest, the poor are threatened, evicted, and handed over to the police.

Yet solidarity is at the heart of this film. Despite the ordeal faced by the dispossessed and disempowered, they support each other—not only Daniel and Katie but also neighbours, other jobseekers, and even an employee in the benefits office, before her manager reprimands her for this "inappropriate behaviour." When Daniel protests outside the dole office, passers-by sympathise and join in. There is genuine feeling of a common cause in defending the poor against the state.

Daniel, Katie and Katie's children are distinctive and authentic. The viewer can easily identify and sympathise with their humanity and their plight, their struggle against the authorities. They, their neighbours and some friends treat one another with the respect and humanity that is lacking in the state's attitude. Daniel, surrounded by a world devoid of beauty, creates magnificent wooden decorations. Here we find some of the ingredients needed for a humane society: humanity, dignity, and a sense of what life should be like.

The sympathy of both Loach and Laverty lies with their main characters. They are furious with the system that attempts to crush them. However, there is no sentimentality. This is the account of discarded working-class people, a very real story of those many who are at the mercy of the system.

To return to our opening thoughts on the gulf between the "lofty" domain of escapist art and the real lives of working people: Loach's film shows what honest, realist art can achieve. Resulting from his film, a BBC Newsnight report dealt with the cruel and vindictive sanctions imposed on the unemployed in Britain. Actual reality may be even worse than that portrayed in the film. Also, many people have commented on their own experience on social media, how they have been humiliated in the way seen in the film, how the film tells their story.

As Loach rightly pointed out, the unemployed are not at fault for the lack of jobs: it is capitalism. Ken Loach bestows dignity on his characters, and a presence that is rare on our screens. This dignity is expressed throughout the film and emphasised in Daniel Blake's final statement, which begins, "I, Daniel Blake. ★