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1917

Ten days that shaped the twentieth century

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Guardian

▲ Peadar O Donnell's banner led the [illegible] John Douglas speaking with the Communist Party in the back ground

HOUSING

A new campaign for public housing

THE CAMPAIGN for Public Housing was launched in Dublin at the end of October.

The Communist Party of Ireland is one of a number of socialist organisations, tenants' associations, community activists and other groups that make up the broad alliance within the campaign. The campaign was launched in Dublin, but it is planned to expand it throughout the country in the coming weeks as the crisis in housing reaches disastrous proportions. It must be solved once and for all.

The Campaign for Public Housing will bring us into conflict with the EU, because of its rules on competition in the Growth and Stability Pact.

We need to look at an all-Ireland campaign for public housing, as the crisis is equally bad in the North.

The Campaign for Public Housing is not for tweaking, modifying or reforming the present housing policy in the hope of making it easier and less painful for citizens to afford and obtain a home: it is for transforming housing from a profit-making commodity into a right for every citizen to have a secure home.

We are challenging the hegemonic neo-liberal ideology and its economic base, which is at the root of the crisis. The state has abandoned the citizens' need for a roof over their heads to the private sector, whose only interest is profit. It does this by subsidising the cost of renting or buying a home through various grants and subsidies, such as the housing assistance payment (HAP), rental accommodation scheme (RAS), leasing, and various tax incentives. By paying the difference between the contribution of the tenant and the rent demanded by the profiteers, the subsidies and rent assistance go directly into the pockets of the private sector as profit.

The state has also sought to attract housing associations, including real-estate investment trusts (REITs) and transnational corporations, into the rental market through tax incentives and by artificially inflating rents in the private sector through not investing in public housing. (This policy is not unique to Ireland: it is now being introduced all over the capitalist world.)

It is all part of the policy decision of the state to privatise and commodify all services, instead of providing for the needs of the citizens as part of the social contract. And it is not only in housing, as we have already seen with the attempt to introduce water charges and the attack on the public transport system and its workers last year, coupled with the continuous selling off of our natural resources and the privatising of our public services. Capital continuously seeks new commodities and markets to exploit in the never-ending search for more and increasing profits.

Capitalism never can and never will build enough houses to guarantee a safe, secure home for all our citizens.

A sustained building programme of public housing, built, managed and owned by the state, will bring to an end the failed housing policies and end the crisis once and for all. It will also stabilise and reduce property prices and rents, as the abundant supply of public housing will end shortages, congestion, and homelessness.

The public housing stock will be a state asset and a public resource that will pay for itself over time, both financially and socially, as the precarious and uncertain nature of private rents, unaffordable mortgages and fluctuating interest rates will be removed permanently from the equation. With the profit element removed, this wealth will no longer be hoarded by the elite but will be put into general circulation, to be spent on the other necessities of life required by citizens.

We do not seek an accommodation with capitalism, which always provides only for a temporary solution so as to confuse, frustrate and placate the working class. Our demand is for transforming housing into the socialist alternative, that is, public housing for all citizens, universally available on the grounds of need, as a right afforded to all our citizens.

We encourage all like-minded people and groups to become involved in the Campaign for Public Housing and help bring an end to the permanent crisis in housing. ★

Varadkar's ill-considered message

Tommy McKearney

FOR A POLITICIAN who spends so much taxpayers' money on a "Strategic Communications Unit," Leo Varadkar managed to deliver an extraordinarily ill-considered and dangerous message on his trip to the North last month.

In an interview with the BBC he said: "I wouldn't like us to get to the point whereby we are changing the constitutional position here in Northern Ireland on a 50 per cent plus 1 basis." His words were immediately seized upon by the right-wing Unionist John Taylor, who then told the *News Letter,* "You cannot force Northern Ireland out of the UK by a 1 per cent majority. Can you imagine the loyalists in Belfast taking it quietly?"

We may discount Taylor's belligerent comments as unremarkable for a curmudgeonly old imperialist; but Varadkar's comment undermines a fundamental principle of normal democratic process in an area not known for holding the concept in high regard.

Worse, his words were tantamount to inviting violence in the event of changing voting patterns. Ideally, of course, there would be overwhelming support and uncontested agreement for the ending of partition; in reality, there is no prospect of unanimity on this contentious issue, and the ending of partition has to be dealt with in this light.

We should recognise—as Varadkar obviously does—that this is no longer a matter of academic interest. The demographic and political make-up of Northern Ireland is changing, and probably more rapidly than many people realise. This was evident during the recent elections for the British Parliament, when mainstream unionism lost an absolute majority in the Assembly and Sinn Féin candidates made significant gains.

Moreover, following the passing of the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act (2011), it is anticipated that under this new arrangement Sinn Féin (or other non-unionists) will secure an equal, if not the greater, number of Westminster seats in the Six Counties.[1]

Therefore, unless we are prepared to endure a repeat of the events of 1912, with all the problems flowing from that period in our history, it is important that changing realities are addressed honestly and openly. It is vital to this process that governments in Dublin take a lead, and do so now, when there is time to have rational, non-hysterical discussion to prepare the way for negotiated change. The alternative is to invite the most backward element within unionism to stage a putsch and risk having the carnival of reaction trundle on for decades to come.

> The demographic and political make-up of Northern Ireland is changing, and probably more rapidly than many people realise

A sceptic might suggest, however, that this is what Fine Gael and pro-imperialist elements of Ireland's ruling class want. In certain circumstances it suits the powerful elite to sidestep or recalibrate the wishes of the majority. Think how the electorate's initial decision to reject the Lisbon Treaty was overturned. More recently there was the devious shilly-shallying in relation to water charges. A disingenuous and deliberately ambiguous "excessive use" clause is undoubtedly designed to facilitate the reintroduction of charges in a few years' time.

There is little new in this. The South's ruling elite is skilled in the use of underhand practices. The most notorious rearranging of the popular will occurred at the very foundation of the 26-County state when Leo Varadkar's predecessors in Cumann na nGaedheal put paid to the Democratic Programme published and approved by the first Dáil Éireann on the day its deputies declared an Irish Republic. Indeed it can reasonably be argued that overturning the Democratic Programme, which stated that "all right to private property must be subordinated to the public right and welfare . . ."[2] was one of the motivating factors behind the outbreak of civil war in 1922.

All of which might well be dismissed as history were it not for the fact that the centenary of the Democratic Programme is fast approaching, and undoubtedly with renewed interest in its contents and message. And while the document remains of value in its entirety, some sections are of immediate contemporary relevance.

The programme's last paragraph calls upon the national government to seek co-operation with other countries to guarantee a standard of social and industrial legislation that would ensure a general and lasting improvement in the conditions under which workers live and labour. In the light of the prevailing neo-liberal and anti-worker dictates of Brussels, that particular demand certainly challenges supporters of the EU sitting in the present-day Dáil.

Ireland's ruling elite has become so adept at manipulating the present system that many working people feel unable to correct flaws in the status quo. Look at the do-little fussing in response to Garda misconduct. Look too at the recent charade surrounding the banks and the tracker mortgage scandal.

It's not surprising that so many people feel helpless in the face of powerful vested interests. Well, we might ask, has anything changed since Lenin said that bourgeois democracy allows working people to decide every few years which particular representatives of the elite will represent and repress them in parliament?[3]

While not advocating an ultra-leftist type of total rejection of parliamentary democracy, it is obvious that working people require an additional vehicle through which our voice can be heard and our needs addressed. To succeed, it is necessary to have a structured input from organised labour as well as from dedicated community and political activists. The Right2Change trade unions have organised a worthwhile project, under the banner of "Another Ireland is possible," that has the potential to act as a catalyst for the construction of such a vehicle.

To add to Right2Change's momentum, the Peadar O'Donnell Socialist Republican Forum has planned a conference for Saturday 26 January 2019 in Liberty Hall, Dublin. The Forum intends that this occasion, designed to commemorate and celebrate the convening of the first Dáil and its adoption of the Democratic Programme, will be the culmination of a series of similar, albeit smaller events throughout Ireland. The aim of this undertaking is to assist with the task of building a broad workers' movement that could be co-ordinated through a workers' assembly (or, in deference to the centenary, Dáil na nOibrithe?).

The forum is very clear that it is not acting in competition with other initiatives, such as that organised by the Right2Change movement. The Forum sees its role as facilitating discussion among socialist republicans and encouraging those committed to building a workers' republic. Ultimately, it has to be understood that one of the keys to creating a workers' state is breaking the connection with imperialism, whether it originates in Britain or the European Union, while simultaneously sidelining imperialism's Irish placemen and women. Acting on this insight will allow us to avoid the type of error perpetrated, whether accidentally or deliberately, by Leo Varadkar in Belfast. ★

1 Martin Baxter, "New constituency boundaries for Britain, 2018," at www.electoralcalculus.co.uk/boundaries2018.html.
2 Dáil Éireann, Democratic Programme (21 January 1919),at http://oireachtasdebates.oireachtas.ie/debates%20authoring/debatewebpack.nsf/takes/dail1919012100016.
3 V. I. Lenin, *The State and Revolution* (1917).

A FUTURE WORTH FIGHTING FOR

SIGN THE WORKERS CHARTER

I pledge to support, promote and encourage the following principles within my work-place, my union, the trade union movement, and society more generally.

I am a trade union activist in favour of—

(1) A Trade Union Bill, in the Republic of Ireland and in Northern Ireland, to provide for union recognition, collective bargaining rights, representation on company boards, right to access for union organisers, strong anti-victimisation penalties, solidarity and secondary picketing, and repeal and replacement of the 1990 ROI act and the UK Trade Union Act 2016 where it impacts workers in Northern Ireland;

(2) Legislation to ban zero-hour contracts and to provide for secure hour contracts;

(3) A reduced working week, to make 35 hours the norm, and stronger legislation imposing overtime rates for all workers;

(4) A Jobs Bill to provide for full employment and putting the right to employment in the Constitution of Ireland and into legislation in Northern Ireland providing for a job neutral transition to environmentally sustainable workplaces;

(5) Stronger redundancy legislation, increasing the level of mitigation employers must go through and increased statutory minimum redundancy payments creating a common standard north and south;

(6) A reduction of the statutory pension age to 65, to bring it into line with most occupational schemes, and a mandatory minimum pension provision that employers with more than twenty employees must provide, with a compulsory minimum employers' contribution;

(7) Equal pay for work of equal value; no lesser contracts for new entrants; enhanced gender equality pay legislation north and south and equality of pay and conditions for private sector care workers within the public sector;

(8) Legislation to make illegal any unpaid out-of-hours calls and work on mobile devices, tablets and computers in both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland;

(9) The strengthening of health and safety legislation in both jurisdictions to tackle the increase in work-related stress and to identify and remove the hazards that cause work-related stress, such as understaffing, imposed targets and unpaid overtime; and

(10) A renewed approach to the training of apprentices, with agreed rates, recognised qualifications, and union inspectors, with penalties for offences. All government awarded contracts should have a guarantee of apprenticeship places agreed with the appropriate trade union(s). ★

The charter can be signed at www.tuleftforum.com/workers-charter/

Reduced VAT rate is a subsidy for hotels

Kieran Crilly

SOMETIMES things that don't appear in the budget are more important than those that do. One of these was the retention of the VAT rate of 9 per cent for hotels and catering. This policy, introduced in 2011 to help the catering and hotel industries, costs about €500 million a year.

At the moment the economy is growing strongly and there is no sign of a recession, but the rate was kept by the Government because of Brexit, even though employment in the industry grew by 5½ per cent last year and the number of tourists coming from abroad increased by 1½ per cent. Domestic tourism is also growing. Room rates in Dublin hotels have probably increased by more than 20 per cent in the last two years.

The reduced rate applies to fast-food outlets like McDonald's, Starbucks, Kentucky Fried Chicken, and Supermacs. It also applies to chippers and to Chinese and Indian takeaways. (These outlets supply food that is full of fat and are a major contributor to obesity—a growing problem in recent years.)

It applies also to the foreign-owned coffee-shop chains, such as Starbucks, an American franchise renowned for not paying corporation tax, Costa, an English group, and Esquires, a Canadian chain.

The subsidy applies also to exclusive golf clubs, like the K Club at Straffan, Co. Kildare, and the Old Head Golf Links in Kinsale. This is a misdirected subsidy for the rich, a subsidy to fee-charging golf clubs.

The table shows how the 9 per cent VAT rate works as a subsidy for hotels.

The cost of a stay in January is lower than in the peak season, so the figures in the table are in fact an underestimate of the subsidy provided by the lower tax rate.

The average subsidy per room is €3,848. If one of these hotels had a hundred beds and received the average subsidy, the total annual subsidy would be €384,780.

So for the big hotels the cut in the VAT rate is providing a large subsidy, and in recent years this has not been passed on to consumers, as prices in the hotel industry have been rising.

The owners of hotels and restaurants are in general anti-union, and the industry is noted for low wages, part-time contracts, and zero-hour contracts.

The €500 million could be used in addressing the housing crisis and providing more social housing. For example, if a house cost €250,000 to construct, €500 million could mean 2,000 extra housing units a year. ★

Cost of a stay of one week (12–19 January 2018)

	Cost of a room	*Subsidy per room per week*	*Annual subsidy per room*
Gibson Hotel	€1.121	€50.45	€2,623
Shelbourne Hotel	€2,601	€117,05	€6,086
Gresham Hotel	€1.061	€47.75	€2,483
Continental Hotel	€1.539	€69,26	€3,601
Westbury Hotel	€1.900	€85,50	€4,446

The battle for Venezuela goes on

Seán Edwards

VENEZUELA HELD regional elections on 15 October, electing governors in the twenty-three states.

What was reported in the corporate media was that the opposition denounced the results as fraudulent, as did the governments of the United States, France, and Canada. The opposition has cried "fraud" every time it has lost an election since Chávez was first elected in 1998. This, if it were so, would be difficult to achieve, as Venezuela has the most tamper-proof electoral system in the world, with electronic voting backed up by a paper record.

Yet if you relied on press reports you would be left with the impression that the election was a bit dodgy. That President Maduro is a "dictator" is an article of faith for our journalists and commentators.

The overwhelming victory of the Chavista forces, winning 18 of the 23 governorships with 54 per cent of the total vote, was the second electoral victory this year. In July, 8 million people voted in the election of the new National Constituent Assembly, in spite of an opposition boycott campaign.

For the United States, "regime change" in Venezuela has been one of the main foreign policy objectives since Chávez was first elected. After the coup d'état of 2002 was defeated by a massive popular mobilisation, the defeated oligarchy continued to try to undermine the government by any means: economic sabotage, street violence, advocating international sanctions against their country, even invasion.

In all this they have the support of the United States. Obama twice declared officially that Venezuela represents a "clear and present danger" to the United States. Trump even threatens a military intervention.

The economic sabotage conducted by the major importing monopolies consisted in the main of creating shortages of specific goods, calculated to cause maximum discomfort and annoyance. Several times, articles that had disappeared from the shelves were found stockpiled in warehouses.

In a little book, *The Visible Hand of the Market*, the economist Pasquelina Curcio analyses the statistics and finds that the shortages do not correlate with economic trends, or with the supply of foreign currency to importers. She did find a correlation with elections.

This, combined with the government's own action and inaction, and especially with the catastrophic drop in the price of oil, has indeed created an economic crisis, with runaway inflation. The result was the opposition's victory in the National Assembly election in December 2015. The only objective they set themselves in the Assembly was the removal of President Maduro, which, they said, would be accomplished in three months.

The extreme right began a campaign of street violence, known as *"guarimbas"*: blockading the streets, lighting fires in the street, attacking public buildings, including a maternity hospital, and lynching people assumed to be Chavistas. Several young men were burnt alive; others, including a judge, were assassinated.

You would not know this from reading the *Irish Times*, which reported alleged repression of peaceful demonstrations. Outside the mainstream media you can find Abby Martin's "Empire Files" reports on the internet.*

When the Constituent Assembly brought forward the date of the regional elections, from December to October, the opposition parties rushed confidently to contest them, sure that their victory would force President Maduro out of office. The guarimbas were called off, for now. Hence the knee-jerk accusations of fraud when they lost.

More sober voices, such as that of Henri Falcón, outgoing governor of Lara state and defeated candidate for re-election, and Henry Ramos Allup, leader of Democratic Action, soon acknowledged that they had in fact lost the election. They had lost the support they had gained in 2015; they had produced no programme; the guarimbas had done more political damage to them than to the government, most of the disturbances being in opposition-held areas; and some of the extreme right, including María Corina Machado, had actually advocated a boycott of the election.

The five opposition governors-elect at first refused to attend the swearing in of the new governors at the Constituent Assembly; but a few days later four of the five gave in, holding a separate ceremony. The opposition has split, with much recrimination. Henrique Capriles Radonski, former presidential candidate and governor of Miranda state, has withdrawn from the alliance.

From the outside, Luis Almagro, secretary-general of the Organisation of American States, accuses the opposition of "participating in a fraud" by contesting the election in the first place. It is the most extreme right that has his support, and the support of the United States.

The battle for Venezuela goes on. Nicolás Maduro has won a few skirmishes. The Constituent Assembly has the task of preparing amendments to the Constitution that will consolidate the gains of the Bolivarian Revolution—as Chávez would say, "deepening the revolution." ★

*www.youtube.com/watch?v=ig6yFP8HjVQ.

Above: masked oppositionists

Unity is strength

Jimmy Doran

ARTIFICIAL BARRIERS of religion and politics have been used down through the years to divide our people.

In the North in 1932 there was a time when there was total unity of the working class. This was during the outdoor relief (social assistance) strike, when Catholic and Protestant workers united and went on strike for the common good. Workers from the two communities fought side by side on the Falls and the Shankill as the state refused to give in to their demands.

Eventually, divisions were implanted in their ranks, as agents of the state suggested that the republicans were using the outdoor relief strike as a cover for overthrowing "Protestants' rights." The state knew well how to manipulate the situation. Despite this, it also had to give in to many of the legitimate demands in order to overcome the class unity and to continue the imperial dominance through a "carrot and stick" approach.

Sectarian tensions were fuelled by the ruling class and their provocateurs, who divided and conquered once again. It would not be until the late 1960s that unity of the people over the artificially manufactured divisions in society was to begin to happen again. Demands for civil rights made by the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association were supported by sections of both communities.

This unity had the potential to grow. Once again the state used every means at its disposal to divide this unity at any cost, which resulted in thirty years of war and more than three thousand deaths.

The state believed it could control and win the war, and this option was better than class unity. It underestimated the resistance to colonial rule; and eventually military stalemate and war-weariness developed and a compromise was agreed in the form of the Belfast Agreement.

Both communities elected politicians to represent them in the new Assembly. The state has always used the same weapon to control the people, with an ingrained sectarian head count in the parliamentary system adopted as part of the agreement.

So the war goes on—this time without the killing but still with the same state-instilled and artificial sectarian hatred. Opportunities to unite the class do not regularly happen in this failed statelet.

Now, with the Brexit debate coming to the fore, the real common enemy—British and EU imperialism—is being exposed, with falling wages, cuts to services, privatisation, precarious work, and the switch to the uncertainty of private rented accommodation, to name a few of the realities of life under the neo-liberal system preferred by both Britain and the EU ruling elite.

This was not always obvious when the two communities were at war with each other. Both were being equally denied their rights by their imperial masters, who played one off against the other. Housing and employment were dire for both communities, but it was always weighted towards one side rather than the other.

A lot of the time the perception of one side being better off than the other was just that: a perception. The citizens of the North were among the most deprived in Europe. If you compare the standard of housing down the Shankill with the Falls it most certainly is far from superior, and often a lot worse. The segregation in the education system was a tool for keeping the two communities propping up their respective churches and in turn furthering sectarian hatred and division.

The National Health Service in the past was a lot better than what people had in the South, but it was paid for by the exploitation, plunder and pillage of the imperialism of the British Empire as capital compromised with labour after the Second World War to rebuild its industrial base. As the Orange state disintegrated and citizens suffered austerity equally, the true class nature of both British and European rule becomes as clear as day, as life is now run on a constant stream of debt, uncertainty, and despair.

The mask of a "social EU" is being exposed daily, and, with Brexit, British imperialism will be shown to be no different. The time has come for the ordinary people of the North to once again join together against their common enemy, that is, imperialism, both EU and British, and campaign for full exit from the EU and to join with the rest of the citizens in the South to demand an Irexit. One people, one country, united against European imperialism.

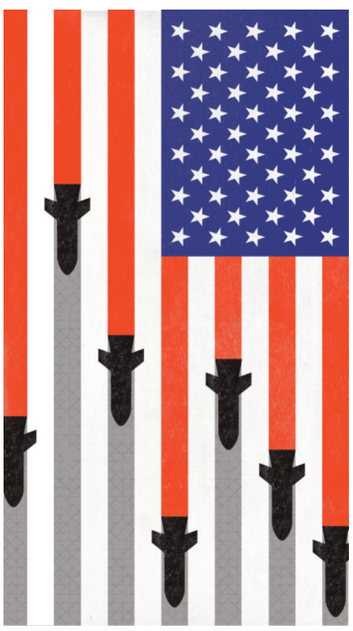
With the EU gone, the obvious solution to "soft border or hard border" is no border: an Irish EU exit at the same time. It makes no sense to remain in the EU any more: 65 per cent of exports and 73 per cent of imports are with non-EU countries.

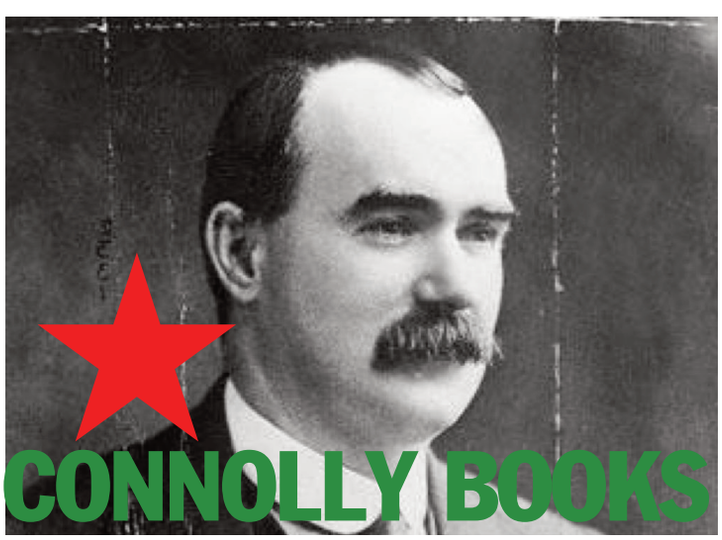
That's just the capitalist argument to leave, the same as was used when we were told in 1973 that we had to join once Britain did. This is not being discussed in the establishment media, as it is not in their interests, because the EU is deliberately designed to protect the interests of European big business, which in turn props up and supports the ruling classes of the member-states, at ordinary working people's expense.

One people, one country, one democracy. Economic democracy for all the working class, and an end to the tyranny of capitalism for us all. ★

O say, can you see ...?

O say does that star-spangled banner now wave
Over lands that were free and where homes are now graves.





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Political Statement National Executive Committee, 21 October 2017

AT THE National Executive Committee meeting of the Communist Party there was a discussion of the growing housing crisis in the north and south of the country. In particular, the Irish government has failed to address in any serious way either the growing number of families who are homeless or the increasing number of families facing eviction.

The housing crisis stems from a combination of government priority given to the private rental market over the provision of publicly funded and owned housing and the role of global vulture funds, now moving into the private rental market, in the expectation that vast profits can be made from the growing pressure of those seeking a place to live.

The government's and state's strategy is to establish precarious employment and short-term contracts as the norm in the economy, coupled with precarious shelter—that is, people relying upon the private rental market alone. Capitalism and neo-liberal thinking created this crisis, and using those very same methods will not solve the problem but can only further exacerbate it.

They have built in insecurity, both in work and in the securing of a home. Only the massive national state-run construction of public housing can solve this deepening crisis. What is needed is public housing, tailored to tenants' ability to pay. It has been shown in the past that the state, with the local authorities, has the capacity to implement a public housing programme. It seems that the current government is opposed to this in principle, committed as it is to neo-liberal ideology.

The Communist Party welcomes the establishment of the Campaign for Public Housing, which will endeavour to mobilise the working people around the central demand for a state-funded public house-building programme.

The campaign for the Repeal of the Eighth Amendment to the Constitution continues to gather momentum, as shown by the participation of tens of thousands in the demonstration on the 30th of September, especially by young women.

In the North of Ireland also there is a manifestly growing campaign for a change in the law governing abortion. This is seen in the size of the demonstrations and the link being made with other aspects of reactionary social policy, such as the "two-child cap and rape clause" (British government policy limiting families to claiming tax credits for their first two children, unless women prove that their third child was conceived through rape or during an abusive relationship). There is a spirit of co-operation between the campaigns in both parts of the country.

The recent budget presented by the Irish government was framed within the fiscal straitjacket laid down by the European Union. The government and state must produce a balanced budget. So we had tax cuts for better-paid workers and the professional and business classes. This can only mean further cuts in public spending, which hit hardest the working people, who rely upon these services. It was a budget to see who could secure and retain the votes of those relatively privileged sectors in the next election, with Fine Gael attempting to outflank Fianna Fáil.

The NEC also discussed the continuing paralysis in the Northern Ireland Assembly established under the Belfast Agreement. What is clear is that leading sections of unionism are opposed to any weakening in what it sees as the "British identity" of the North of Ireland. This is expressed in its opposition to an Irish Language Act, previously agreed upon as part of the St Andrews Agreement, and in the strengthening of the DUP's support for and influence within the British Conservative government.

At the same time the British state presents itself as a disinterested party, waiting until the two local tribes come to their senses and learn to live with each other. That is not the case. Its strategic political and economic interests in Ireland as a whole are still extremely important to it.

Not only do the DUP and Sinn Féin appear incapable of negotiating the return of the Northern Ireland Executive but where they do agree on an issue, such as the need to protect jobs at the Bombardier aircraft plant in Belfast, they have been shown to be irrelevant. Having milked the public purse for £2 million of investment, Bombardier now seemed ready to make a deal with the European aerospace heavyweight Airbus, giving no assurances to the Belfast work force. What is needed is a trade-union-led mobilisation of working people in the North, with cross-party support and with the solidarity of workers in the South, to press home the need for this skilled work force of over four thousand and the value of its extensive supply chain as part of a public-sector-led industrial policy, planning and investment action plan.

While the phoney war on Brexit continues, it appears that Irish interests are being used as a pawn in the "talks, no talks" saga. It is clear that significant and powerful forces in Britain, the EU and the United States want a rerun of the referendum to secure a reversal of the democratic decision of the people within the British state.

Workers must be mindful of what is at stake. It is the big monopolies, both manufacturing and finance, in Britain and on the Continent, that benefit most from and are the driving force behind the European Union and the attempt to undermine a clear disentangling of the UK from the imperialist institutions of the EU. Policies for a People's Brexit have to be clearly stated and fought for. ★

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Ten days that shaped a century

Eugene McCartan

THIS NOVEMBER, tens of millions of working people around the world will celebrate the centenary of the Russian Revolution, which took place on 7 November 1917 (or 25 October according to the Julian calendar, then used in Russia).

To understand how the revolution happened we need to place it in a clear historical context: the role of the mass of workers and peasants, the inter-imperialist First World War, and the barbarism inflicted on millions of workers who fought in that imperialist conflict and in particular the huge effect it had on the Russian empire.

We first need to go back to 1905 and the revolt of workers in St Petersburg and Moscow and other Russian cities.

In 1904 and 1905 the Russian empire was at war with the Japanese empire. As workers and peasants revolted against their conditions, strikes broke out throughout the Russian empire, involving up to half a million workers. The first workers' soviets (*soviet* is the Russian word for *council)* sprang up in factories, in May 1905. This was followed in July and August by the establishment of a Peasants' Union.

Also in 1905, open opposition, with the formation of soldiers' and sailors' soviets, began to manifest itself within the army and navy. In June 1905 the sailors on the battle cruiser *Potëmkin* revolted against their officers. By October 1905 more than 2 million workers were on strike throughout Russia, and workers' soviets were established in many factories and cities. More than fifty peasants' soviets had also been established.

The struggles of 1905, though defeated, provided an example and a lesson for the working class, as a kind of rehearsal for the revolution of 1917.

Russia was the heart of the Tsarist empire, which stretched from Poland to Central Asia and as far as the Pacific Ocean, as well as being its largest and most economically important part. The population of the Russian empire in 1905 was approximately 125 million, with Russians accounting for 56 million of these. This empire was dominated by a feudal landlord class, with an emerging and important capitalist class.

The Russian Social Democratic Labour Party, based on Marxism, had been founded in 1898 in Minsk. After its 1903 congress two factions emerged: the revolutionary Bolsheviks (meaning majority) and the reformist Mensheviks (minority).

Lenin was to become one of the foremost leaders in the organisation of the international workers' movement. He championed revolutionary transformation, as against the strong reformist current within the workers' movement.

At the Basel conference of the Socialist International in 1912 the socialist parties of Europe agreed to oppose the coming inter-imperialist war. Lenin, among others, argued that workers' parties should not side with their own ruling class but rather turn the war in Europe into a civil war, with the overthrow of emperors, kings and queens and the industrial capitalist class. This was a view shared by James Connolly and the Socialist Party of Ireland, and was one of the reasons why Connolly pushed for a rising in Ireland against the British empire.

With the outbreak of war the International split when major socialist parties, especially the German party, broke the commitments made at Basel, backing their own ruling class. In Russia the Bolshevik Party kept to its commitment, as did James Connolly and the Irish Citizen Army in Ireland.

The outbreak of the inter-imperialist war and the wanton and savage slaughter it entailed had a profound impact on the peoples of Europe and particularly of Russia. The Russian army was made up mainly of peasant soldiers. The slaughter on the Russian front sent shock waves deep into the heart of the Russian peasantry, further weakening Tsarism's political base and strengthening the growing unity between the working class and the peasants.

We are used to being told that history is made by great leaders and generals, rather than by the actions of the people. The Russian Revolution turns this fable on its head. It was the actions of the millions of Russian workers and peasants that created the decisive revolutionary conditions, combined with the strategic political leadership given by the Bolsheviks, led by Lenin. The people wanted and demanded change; the Bolsheviks provided the political and strategic leadership. They gave direction to the working class, peasants, and soldiers.

In 1917 there were two revolutions in Russia. The first one, in February, led to the

overthrow of the Tsarist autocracy and the establishment of a government dominated by the Russian bourgeoisie under Alexander Kerensky. His government declared that it was in favour of social and economic reform and had the ending of the war as its goal; but these were promises that it was never capable of fulfilling.

The months between February and October became known as the period of dual power, with the Russian state and government on one side and the Workers', Peasants' and Soldiers' Soviets, with the support of the masses, on the other. Within the Soviets the Bolshevik Party rapidly gained support, becoming a majority by October.

It was in this revolutionary period that Lenin published his *April Theses* in the Bolshevik newspaper *Pravda* (Truth) of 7 April. They captured the mood and the experience of the working class and poor peasants and inspired the struggles and sacrifices that broke the back of the Kerensky government, culminating in the October Revolution.

Lenin outlined the strategy that should be developed in order to push the revolutionary process forward and consolidate the gains and advances already achieved. The Theses laid out the core strategic positions for meeting the situation facing the people and helped to refocus the Bolshevik party. They reaffirmed the following policies:

- That the Great War was an inter-imperialist war, and the working class should have nothing to do with it.
- That there should be no support for the Provisional Government.
- That the February Revolution was only the first phase, and that workers and peasants needed to push forward to see the transfer of power from the bourgeoisie to the Workers' and Peasants' Soviets.
- That the Bolshevik party needed to engage more deeply with the mass of the people, to argue that "the entire state power" must rest with the soviets.
- That they must counter the influence of those forces that would make the soviets subservient to the will of the Provisional Government; through this struggle the workers would learn and gain experience, would steel themselves in struggle.
- Based on their own experiences from 1905 onwards, that the people's demands could be fulfilled only by the soviets (this was what Connolly called a workers' republic).
- That the instruments of state repression, such as the police and army, as well as the state bureaucracy, had to be done away with.

The April Theses also put forward crucial economic demands that had the potential to rally workers and peasants—demands that would put economic and political power into the hands of the working class and peasantry. These demands included:

- The nationalisation of all banks and the establishment of one bank under the control the Workers' and Peasants' Soviet—i.e. a worker-controlled state bank.
- The break-up of the big landed estates, and all land to become public property, which would be disposed of under the control and direction of the local Soviets of Agricultural Labourers' and Peasants' Deputies.
- All distribution of products to be under the control of the Soviets.

The Theses also dealt with two additional pressing problems. Firstly, they called for the holding of a party congress, to update its political programme and to sharpen and deepen its ideological development as well as to strengthen party discipline.

Secondly, Lenin called for the establishment of a new workers' international to combat social-chauvinism, reformism, and opportunism, which were dominant features of the heavily compromised Second International. This new Third International—the Communist International—was established in 1919.

In July 1917 the Bolsheviks raised the slogan "Peace, bread, land," which immediately found a response with the masses of the Russian people and in particular with the Russian soldiers fighting on the front.

By October, power had decisively shifted from the old ruling-class forces, which could no longer continue to rule in the old way, to the new class forces expressed in the alliance of workers and poor peasants, who were no longer prepared to be ruled in the old way.

The Bolshevik revolution triumphed on 25 October 1917 (7 November according to the modern calendar). Working-class state power, in alliance with the peasantry, was established.

On the night of 24 October in Petrograd (St Petersburg), Red Guards, along with armed factory workers and sailors from the Baltic Fleet, seized the banks, railway stations, telegraph office, and power stations. They captured the Winter Palace, the political base of the Provisional Government. Kerensky fled, the remainder of his government was arrested, and the palace was secured.

Power had moved swiftly from the Russian ruling class to the working class and peasants, with the Bolsheviks playing a leading political, ideological and organisational role.

In its first act after the triumph of the revolution the Soviet of Workers' and Peasants' Deputies adopted a number of decrees. One of the first was the Decree on Peace, which stated the new revolutionary government's position regarding the Great War. It outlined measures for Russia's withdrawal and an immediate end to the war, "without the payment of indemnities, or annexations."

The second major decree was the Decree on Land. It described measures for transferring and dividing rural land among those who worked it. It allowed for the forcible breaking up of many wealthy estates by peasant forces, fulfilling one of the central demands of the April Theses.

The Workers' Decrees established for the first time a minimum wage and limits on working hours and allowed for the taking over and running of factories by elected workers' committees.

The Russian Revolution liberated the various non-Russian nationalities from the colonial yoke and gave them control as autonomous socialist republics within the union. This was a precursor of the law adopted in 1922 that established the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

The establishment of workers' state power laid the foundation for what was to follow in a few short years:

- The destruction of landlordism as a rural economic system, giving poor peasants and agricultural workers a stake in the collectivised farms and co-operatives.
- A free health service for all citizens, in a society in which tens of millions of people had been denied access to even rudimentary medical services.
- A guarantee of equal rights for women, including the vote, together with equal wages, maternity benefits, and the right to divorce.
- Employment for all and the eradication of unemployment; by 1936 all employment exchanges were closed as full employment was achieved.
- The establishment of universal free education at all levels.
- The elimination of illiteracy within ten years of the end of the civil war.
- Cultural resources made available to the people, with an explosion in theatre and cinema, once the preserve of the rich.

The support given by the Soviet Union added great impetus, in some cases decisive, to the national liberation struggles of the twentieth century. It was the Soviet Union that broke the back of fascism and was the main force for world peace from its very beginning.

The Russian Revolution led to a surge in revolutionary and progressive movements around the world. Communist parties were established in many countries (including Ireland) along the lines of the Bolshevik Party. Workers' resistance grew, and revolutions erupted in a number of European countries—all of which were defeated. Here in Ireland the Russian Revolution inspired thousands of workers to take to the streets in support of the Bolsheviks. Workers established soviets in a number of towns and rural communities.

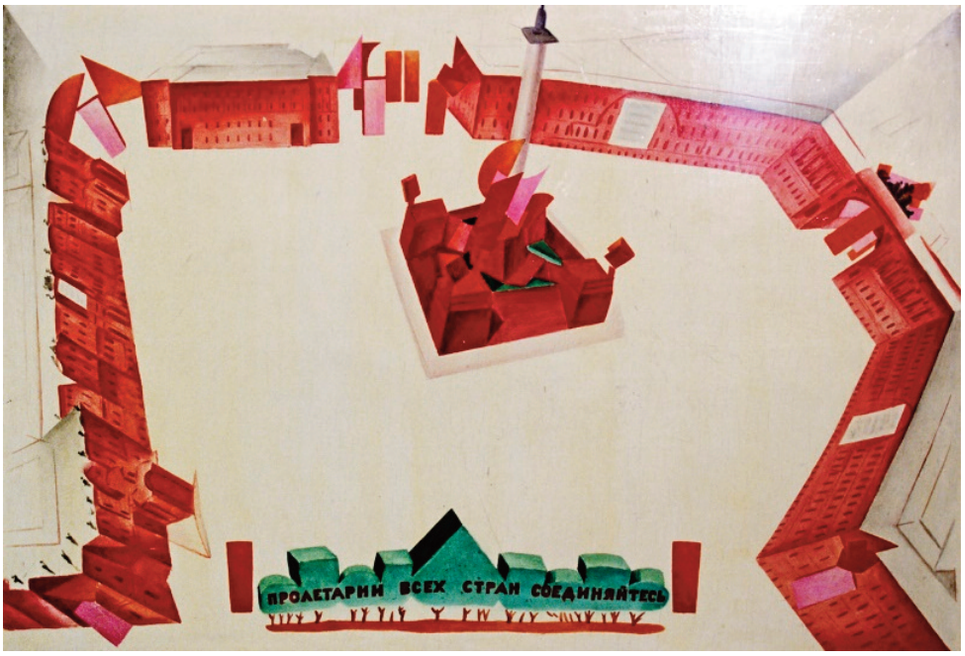
The Russian Revolution sent shock waves into the heart of the ruling class around the world. Fifteen countries (Australia, Britain, British India, British South Africa, Canada, China, Czechoslovakia, France, Greece, Italy, Japan, Poland, Romania, Serbia, and the United States) invaded Soviet Russia in support of the counter-revolutionaries during the civil war that erupted as the old ruling class attempted to roll back the tide of history. Their intervention prolonged the war until 1920, causing enormous social and economic damage and creating great and enduring difficulties for the construction of socialism.

The lessons of the Russian Revolution are many. We cannot simply replicate history or historical events; but what is certain is that only the working class can be the decisive force in ending exploitation, that revolution requires the active participation of a class-conscious working class, and that neither the overthrow of the capitalist and imperialist system nor the building of a new society is achieved spontaneously but is the product of conscious thought and action.

History is made by the conscious actions of the masses. For this, workers need their own political programme, and a revolutionary workers' party. ★

THE ART OF REVOLUTION

1917



WITH THE Russian Revolution the dispossessed took control over their destiny, for the first time in history. Jenny Farrell examines how artists responded to this liberation.

Artists from all artistic movements worked with the Soviet power. The revolution offered the state and the arts a real opportunity to merge their programmatic ideas. Lenin saw social and cultural revolution as inseparable, and the artistic avant-garde embraced the new opportunities.

The arts were to be democratised, artistic production transferred from the private to the public sphere, and "the streets to be turned into a celebration of art for all." The 1918 May Day celebrations were a first impressive manifestation of this.

The next major assignment was the decoration of Moscow and Petrograd for the 1918 October celebrations. Over 170 artists participated, exhibiting an immense range of artistic expression. Alongside images of workers, soldiers and peasants there were ambitious modernist projects, such as Nathan Altman's transformation of the Alexander Column in Palace Square, Petrograd, into a "Flame of the Revolution," devouring the symbols of tsarism. Altman fused geometrical structures in shades of red to create a dynamic composition, which attracted international attention.

Great artistic variety marked the time immediately after the revolution. From the early 1900s there had been a significant Russian avant-garde. Many of these artists engaged with the challenges of a new society. The constructivists, for example, criticised bourgeois "embellishments," demanding a truly new era in art, beginning with "the new houses, the new streets, the new commodities" created by the proletariat. Art was not to be a "sacred temple."

The new starting-point was to be labour, the factory, producing art objects for all. This innovative art was inspired by left-wing

futurism. Vsevolod Meyerhold pursued such an original approach in the theatre, while the modern medium of film, with Eisenstein's and Pudovkin's outstanding productions, took its triumphant course. A mass audience turned the art of the avant-garde into a broad movement.

The "poster and meeting period"

Lenin was keenly aware that the revolution depended on overcoming the cultural backwardness of the vast country, with its relatively small working class and millions of largely illiterate peasants. Education was a primary cultural task. Some ethnic minorities had no script for their language.

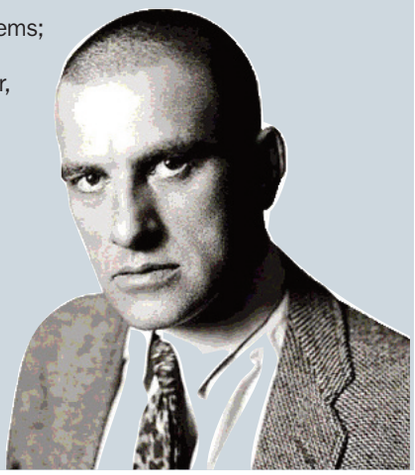
Anatoly Lunacharsky became commissioner of education and culture.

He oversaw the early "poster and meeting period," in which experimental artists pursued revolutionary innovation of various art forms, aiming to enhance the political possibilities of art.

Poster art blossomed, exhibiting a whole range of design principles. Dmitry Moor's world-famous *Have You Enlisted?* and his poster *Help*, occasioned by the famine on the Volga, are composed in concise, expressive pictorial language.

My most respected
comrades of posterity!
Rummaging among
these days'
petrified crap,
exploring the twilight of our times,
you,
possibly,
will inquire about me too.
And, possibly, your scholars
will declare,
with their erudition overwhelming
a swarm of problems;
once there lived
a certain champion of boiled water,
and inveterate enemy of raw water.

Professor,
take off your bicycle glasses!
I myself will expound
those times
and myself.
I, a latrine cleaner
and water carrier,
by the revolution
mobilized and drafted,
went off to the front
from the aristocratic gardens



The ROSTA windows

In an effort to respond quickly to current affairs, Mikhail Cheremnych put a hand-painted poster in the window of the Russian Telegraph Agency (ROSTA) in Moscow in 1920. This initiated the satirical ROSTA windows, of which the painter and poet Vladimir Mayakovsky became the chief representative.

Over a hundred assistants reproduced the hand-painted Moscow posters, using templates, often making three hundred copies. Stencils were sent to other cities. In the days before radio, these windows announced news faster than newspapers. In about two years more than 1,600 posters were produced; Mayakovsky supplied the texts for almost all of them.

This work necessitated direct communication at the centre of his art, reaching out to the new reader. A new "language" combined word and image. Over-dimensional characters dominated, and images accentuated words. Mayakovsky's rhythmic language *right* and appeal influenced the entire collective of ROSTA artists.

In his poetry, Mayakovsky also revolutionised the use of language, infusing the energy, confidence and stride of the revolution and displaying this on the page.

Mayakovsky invested enormous energy in touring the USSR with his verse and reciting it to large audiences.[2]

Images

Left: Vladimir Lebedev, *Work Needs the Rifle Beside You* (Petrograd ROSTA window), 1920
Top Left: Sergei Chekhonin, *Red Ribbon* (1919)
Nathan Altman, *Sketch of the Palace Square Monument* (1918)

Imagery and tradition

Given an 80 per cent rural population and in some regions up to 75 per cent illiteracy, visual imagery was paramount. Motifs came from Russian fairy tales, folk art paintings, and even Russian Orthodox icons. The "new masters" were symbolically represented as giant figures, wrapped in red tunics or shirts, clearly surpassing the "old days." These were especially popular.

Art had to take effect among the people, as Mayakovsky stated: "The streets are our brushes, the places our pallettes. To work, futurists!"

Proletkult (proletarian culture) aspired to a revolutionary working-class art, inspired by the building of a modern industrial society in backward, rural Russia. In October 1917 Aleksander Bogdanov founded a cultural organisation of the proletariat, encouraging workers to write, furthering proletarian culture.

Red memorials

When the revolution suffered foreign military intervention (from February 1918), Lenin initiated "monumental propaganda," to communicate the ideas of the revolution through monuments.

Among the first assignments was a redesign of the tsarist Romanov Obelisk in Moscow to commemorate great revolutionaries, inscribing on it the names of Marx, Engels, More, Winstanley, Stepan Razin, Owens, Saint-Simon, Bakunin, and many more. This declared the international character of the proletarian revolution. (The obelisk recently reverted to its pre-revolutionary form.)

Revolutionary tableware

Agitation porcelain holds a special place within "agitation and mass art." Petrograd artists discovered in 1918, in the imperial porcelain factory, large quantities of unpainted white plates, which they designed with slogans and original ornaments. These china objects took on the function of indoor posters, reflecting the artistic nature of the outdoor posters.

This revolutionary tableware still conveys the spirit of those years. The variety of these works of art is overwhelming. Avant-garde artists decorated traditional delph, and constructivist and suprematist artists, such as Kazimir Malevich, Vasily Kandinsky, and Nikolai Suetin, designed cups and jugs of the future.

A new aesthetics arose from artists identifying with revolutionary transformation, representing individuals not as separate but as part of their people, depicting them as torch-bearers of a new humanity. This was a singular achievement of the revolution. Never before had the dispossessed been presented in art as the decisive factor in historical change; never before had they been made artistically worthy on such a scale.

In this sense, the art of revolution began with some new forms, and above all with a new central character. ★

References and sources

1 www.marxists.org/subject/art/literature/mayakovsky/1930/at-top-my-voice.htm.
2 Yet he suffered from loneliness and depression, which caused him to take his own life in 1930.
Gertraud Sumpf, "Die Ästhetik der Revoultion," *Junge Welt* (Berlin), 20 March 2017.
Nyota Thun, "Ich—so groß und so überflüssig: Wladimir Majakowski," *Leben und Werk* (2000)

POETRY

Where would we be without political satire?

Gabriel Rosenstock introduces and translates another poem from the Indian subcontinent

Writing in Rajasthani, which has a literature stretching back 1,500 years or more, the author Rangrelo Bithu flourished in the sixteenth century. He enjoyed making fun of his king, Rawal Har of Jaisalmer, almost as much as the king enjoyed throwing the poet into prison.

Molaimis go hard na spéire Críocha Dhat

Rangrelo Bithu

Is garbh iad na cnoic ísle, donnrua agus lom
Ní fhásann faic orthu ach cachtas cranda na ndealg.
Scréach péacóige ní chloisfeá
Ó cheann ceann na tíre.
Ní bhuailfeá go deo ann ach le hiéana,
Torcán nó laghairt mhonatóra.
Tá an pobal stiúgtha;
Cuireann an t-ocras i measc na ngort iad
Sa tóir ar an bhféar deilgneach:
Chonac féin iad agus na síolta á n-ithe acu.
Muintir Jadav cuir i gcás in Jaisalmer.

Comáineann an tseanbhanríon a cuid asal
Go dtí lochán i gcéin, ag triall ar uisce;
Téann ann ina haonar,
Suaitheann sí an t-uisce
Lena lámha
Chun an dromchla a ghlanadh
Den salachar go léir ar snámh ann.
Líonann a cuid potaí;
Lódálann ar na frámaí adhmaid ansin iad
A iompraíonn na hasail ar a ndroim
Is abhaile leo
Go spadánta,
Iad caite amach ar fad.

Is plobaire ceart é príomh-bhard an rí;
Caitheann sé a éadach íochtarach
Ar bhealach scaoilte míchuibhiúil;
Is bacach é, an dá chos gan mhaith;
Chloisfeá ag geonaíl é i mbun coisíochta.
Ídithe atá an cairpéad ar a suíonn cúirt Rawal
Agus poill mhóra ann;
Is dúr iad na filí atá aige
Agus ní aithneoidís
Buabhall ó eilifint,
Olann gharbh
Ó shíoda.

Sin iad críocha Dhat anois duit!
Moladh go deo le críocha Dhat!

Gabhann na mná gnaíúla go léir
Ag triall ar uisce an chéad rud ar maidin;
Bíonn sé ina mheán oíche faoin am a dtagann siad abhaile,
Iad in aimhréidh agus trína chéile;
A gcuid páistí—gioblacháin—
Ag caoineadh an lá ar fad.
Sin anois iad críocha Dhat duit.
Molaimis go hard na spéire Críocha Dhat.

Praise galore to the Land of Dhat

The low hills are stony, russet and bare,
with no trees on them save the stunted thorny cactus.
You wouldn't hear the call of a peacock
in all the land.
Hyenas, porcupines and monitor lizards
are the only creatures that you' come across.
The people are starved;
hunger drives them afield
in search of the prickly grass
whose seeds I have seen them eat.
Such as the Jadavs of Jaisalmer.

The senior queen drives her donkeys
to a distant pond to fetch her water;
alone she must go,
and bestirring with her hands
the water
to clear its surface
of the floating dirt and debris,
fill her pots;
and load them onto the wooden frames
on the donkey's backs
and drive them home,
trudging all the way,
tired and exhausted.

The king's chief bard is pot-bellied;
he wears his lower garment
in a loose unseemly manner;
he is lame in both his legs;
and groans at every step he walks.
The carpet on which the Rawal's court assembles
is worn, with large holes in it;
his poets are all stupid
and cannot distinguish between
a buffalo and an elephant;
to them coarse wool
and silk are just the same.

Such is the land of Dhat!
Praises be to the land of Dhat!

The comely women all go
to fetch water at dawn;
they return past midnight
dishevelled and distraught;
their dishevelled children
pine for them all day.
Such, indeed, is the land of Dhat!
Praises galore to the land of Dhat!