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Brexit and 'backstops'

Difficulties for the EU continue to intensify. As the time for a final deal between the British state and the European Union draws near, the British government is attempting to push through its minimalist Brexit strategy so as to secure its "special relationship".
Eugene McCartan
page 2

The painful truth is there is no Donald Trump without Barack Obama, no neofascist stirrings without neoliberal policies—all within the imperial zone. Obama was the brilliant black smiling face of the American empire. Trump is the know-nothing white cruel face of the American empire."— **Cornel West,** *Guardian* (London), 14 January 2018

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Brexit and backstops

WE NEED to recall that Brexit is the result of a political division within the Conservative Party, the political party of the British ruling class. This reflects the split within the capitalist class—by no means confined to Britain—generated by the persisting economic crisis. The settled view of both the British state and the dominant sections of British finance capital was and is to remain within the EU if at all possible.

The British government and British state have been manoeuvring from the very beginning to reverse the decision to leave, or at least to minimise the rupture between the EU and Britain. Brexit has not only exposed a deep fissure within Britain but has severely weakened the EU itself, and has contributed to a further rise in anti-EU sentiment throughout Europe, as can be seen in France, Belgium, Italy, and—most importantly—Germany.

But the beneficiaries of this growing disillusionment have been the political right, facilitated by the opportunism and cowardice of the social-democratic left. The parties criticising the institutions of the European Union have mainly been on the extreme right, some leaning towards fascism.

What is happening is that the remainers within Britain and the EU on the one hand and on the other hand those in Britain who want to see a clear break from the EU have been using the British border in Ireland as the means of securing their strategic positions. Such people as Boris Johnson, David Davis and Jacob Rees-Mogg are using the British border in Ireland as their lever to ensure that Britain leaves the single market and EU customs union.

The DUP know full well that the British state and government will do what is in the interests of British monopoly capital regardless of other considerations, and that the interests of the DUP will be well down the political agenda.

The British Brexiteers are using the DUP to lever May's government into taking a harder line in the negotiations with the EU. At the same time the DUP have been attempting to use the Brexit negotiations to raise questions about the continued relevance and the future of the Belfast Agreement of 1998.

The EU and the Remainers within the Tory party, with significant support among British Labour Party MPs, are trying to use the British border in Ireland to ensure that Britain remains within the EU single market and the customs union. They are holding on fast to the mantra of "no border in Ireland," and using the Belfast Agreement as the stalking-horse to bring this about.

Most of the Tory and Labour MPs would have little if any understanding, nor do they really care, about Ireland and our people. The large demonstration in London calling for a second referendum on Brexit or for the terms of the separation to be put to the people was in the main a middle-class affair. No major organisations of the working class either took part in or supported the demonstration. Yet the little-reported opposition from the working class to membership of the EU remains a decisive factor in relation to Brexit.

The Irish government has been attempting to present itself as having influence at the EU table. But the truth is that they have very little, if any, influence regarding Brexit and the Irish "backstop." We have the Taoiseach waving around newspaper reports of IRA attacks on border customs posts from 1972 as evidence of what could happen if a new border is established—a strange position for the head of the Irish government to be articulating, given the record of his own party, and of successive governments, and their collaboration with the British state.

In addition, the unionists did not take kindly to his antics, and view them as a threat of renewed violence.

There are significant movements of capital between the north and south of the country, and the Irish capitalist class, whether from the nationalist or unionist traditions, are anxious to see this continue.

There are also growing noises from both the government and business that a united Ireland is inevitable, a concept absent for many decades from their political vocabulary. Some are even attempting to pose the choice facing the professional classes, which traditionally supported unionism, as one between two unions: the union with Britain or the European Union.

The Irish labour movement has displayed great confusion regarding how it should respond to Brexit. It has spent the last forty years cosying up to the EU, selling it to Irish workers as the "protector of workers' rights" and in the process receiving funds from the EU for education and training.

We need to step up the struggle for an Irish exit, as our interests as a people, and in particular the interests of the working class, will never be served by the EU and its institutions.

That does not mean that we simply fall back into some subservient relationship with the British state, as in the past. Instead, a departure from the EU could provide the opportunity to break both dependencies and establish an independent, sovereign national democracy, giving real power and influence to working people.

The labour movement needs now to be actively supporting north-south co-operation, the all-Ireland economy, and the protection of the Belfast Agreement. We need to be bold in our demands and not retreat into failed strategies of encouraging the British Labour Party to organise in the Six Counties or establishing a Northern Ireland Labour Party mark 2.

Historical experience has shown that only the working people of Ireland have the capacity to end partition and unite our people, to establish meaningful national sovereignty and national independence, in order to secure their own material needs and interests.

Retreating to the past is not an option. Instead we need to push real, concrete demands for all-Ireland solutions to health, education and economic and social development, an all-Ireland investment and industrial strategy that favours working people, and targeted capital investment that meets the needs of our people, not the needs of speculators and profit-hungry corporations. This requires national control of capital, something that is totally illegal at present under EU rules.

The EU—like the British state—is an obstacle to building a people-centred economy for the working people of Ireland.

But no matter the outcome of the current negotiations, the balance of forces has been shifted, and is shifting. The EU will never be the same again.

Italy under the cosh

And, as the negotiations between Britain and the EU stumble on, the EU Commission has issued a diktat to the new Italian government rejecting its budget and threatening sanctions against the country if it does not comply.

The Italian government—like the Irish, Greek, Spanish and Portuguese governments—has to submit its budget to the EU and Berlin before it is presented and voted on by the national parliament, making the idea of democracy at the national level redundant.

The Italian prime minister, Giuseppe Conte, insisted that his government has no "plan B" for its budget, as the EU demanded unprecedented changes to bring the country into line with EU spending rules that result from adopting the EU single currency.

Actual EU sanctions against Italy would be very difficult and would only further deepen the widespread scepticism about the EU and in particular about retaining the euro itself. The rejection of the country's budget could strain the governing coalition, in which Conte stands as mediator between the powerful deputy premiers, Matteo Salvini of the League and Luigi Di Maio of the Five-Star Movement.

Neither party in the coalition can afford to back down, for fear of conceding ground to the other. It is one thing to bully the likes of Ireland, Greece, Spain, or Portugal; it's another matter to bully one of the founders of the EU and a very large economic force in its own right. This would only lead to growing resistance from within the Italian working class.

Germany itself is now showing strains, as can be seen with the near-collapse of the Social Democratic Party, the weakening of the ruling Christian Democratic Party (losing 10 per cent of its support), and the rise of the right-wing Alternative for Germany, which gained 12 per cent and so entered the regional parliament for the first time.

With the administrators of the EU desperately trying to assert their authority on a number of fronts, events are beginning to put strains on the EU itself and on how it manipulates its growing contradictions. ★

Seeing the wood and the trees

Jimmy Doran

THERE IS no doubt that union density and union activity have declined drastically over recent years. The only time there was any increase was at the height of the global financial crash—and this was not an increase in total membership, it was an increase in density, resulting from the fact that good union jobs survived the recession.

Research at Harvard University in the United States found that a reduction of 1 per cent in union density leads to an increase of 5 per cent in work-related deaths. So, for reasons of health and safety alone, it is essential that trade unionism is reinvigorated.

When we talk of the lack of strike activity in Ireland, whether it be in the public or the private sector, it can be argued that this is a result of an outlook that has developed in trade unions over recent decades.

This was never clearer than when the Industrial Relations Act (1990) was brought in and accepted with minimal fuss. Unions cosied up to the state as if it were benign and benevolent towards workers.

Some have argued that the restructuring of capitalist accumulation has seen the decline or hollowing out of traditional strike-prone highly unionised industries. Alternatively, it could be said that this is because the trade union movement under "social partnership" fell asleep, while employers and capital took full advantage and introduced precarious work, low pay, short-term contracts, "austerity," and a plethora of anti-worker arrangements that turned upside down the nature of employment in the neo-liberal race to the bottom.

The figure of 5 per cent of people being employed in limited-hour contracts is constantly quoted to imply that the other 95 per cent are in decent jobs. If only this were true!

As capitalism entered its highest and last stage, imperialism, employers found new ways to exploit workers in their lives outside the work-place, as the corporate world is now controlled by a small number of corporations, interwoven in every area of workers' lives—not just pay and conditions but everything from housing to food prices. But it's not always obvious.

Unions can be schools of socialism, but

Nicola Lawlor

TO PARAPHRASE and develop Marx, in certain conditions unions can be the schools of socialism for working people; but they are not socialist in themselves, and in fact only rarely act as such schools.

Unions are a product of their conditions. When craft unions dominated, it was the period of emerging capitalism and skilled craft production. They existed to defend the privileged skill of those workers. Under industrial capitalism, general industrial workers' unions took the lead and were often resistant to new workers in the labour market, as this threatened their pay and conditions. And now, under servicing monopoly capitalism, we have seen the decline of industrial unions and the struggling-to-grow form of private servicing-sector trade unionism.

In recent issues of *Socialist Voice* there has been a healthy debate on the future of the trade union movement, union renewal, and the function and purpose of industrial relations legislation. This is to be welcomed. *Socialist Voice* provides space for constructive debate where union activists, officials and academics challenge ideas and push for a coherent strategy for communist trade unionists.

The 12½ per cent corporation tax is promoted as a way of attracting jobs. What it actually does is rob the state of its income and its ability to provide services to the citizens.

Even if businesses did pay the full 12½ per cent, which they do not (the average is a mere 6 per cent, and some pay nothing at all), this is directly linked to state services being slashed—everything from the pension age being increased to growing housing and hospital waiting-lists, along with creeping privatisation.

Private rented accommodation is now the main form of tenure in our cities and towns. Overcrowding has increased for the first time in fifty years. A large proportion of this private rented accommodation is owned by huge private corporations. Some workers earn reasonable wages, but they are still exploited through excessive rents.

Corporations control the price of seeds, fertiliser, and weedkiller, directly affecting the cost of food. They control all aspects of life, from the financial sector to extortionate drug prices, crippling workers with debt, insurance and levies while corporations pay little or nothing to the state.

The change in the outlook of unions during the "social partnership" years facilitated them in morphing into corporate partnership, where corporations and employers, supported by the state, have all the power. Union activity is restricted by legislation while union recognition is refused, as they seek to rid the world of the only organisations capable of fighting them on equal terms.

Workers have come from the glory years of falling inequality, permanent pensionable jobs and the welfare state of the 1970s to the return of the hiring fair and the company store, with 21st-century characteristics.

A trade union member lying on a hospital trolley or forced into emergency accommodation, or left hungry as a result of cuts and poverty pay, is a worker even though they are not at the place of employment.

The 1990 act has taken control and power from the unions and handed it to the employers and the courts. It was the crowning glory of social partnership, leading to decades of mediocrity and lack of action from unions.

The act bans support strikes, secondary picketing, political strikes, sit-ins or occupations, and the element of surprise (seven days' notice required), and allows a range of options for employers through the courts.

There is no doubt that it has led to a decline in union activity, which has led to a lack of confidence and class-consciousness among workers. When there is a strike and pickets are placed on premises it is remarkable that the great majority of people who pass the strikers are people under the age of thirty-five who have no experience of workers' struggle, whereas older citizens would rather die than pass a picket, which they regard as sacrosanct.

Union recognition, access and full collective bargaining rights are essential; but if employers and the courts dictate when and where you can raise the odds, knowing that they can delay and thus weaken the effect of a strike, it leaves a lot of power in their hands.

The political parties and their corporate paymasters have weakened and seriously wounded the trade union movement; but we are not defeated. We are still the largest organisation in the country and over 700,000 members strong. But if workers are to break this corporate partnership we will have to fight like hell to regain lost ground.

The recent "Raise the Roof" protest jointly hosted by the ICTU can be the start of the fight back. Workers and our unions know that politicians and employers act in their own corporate interests. Unions have to go back to their roots and lead the struggle in this class war that is being waged against us—a war that we are losing.

There is no point in walking into this with our hands tied behind our backs. The 1990 act must be abolished. Unions must go on the offensive and come out of defensive mode, which has lost us so much.

As Connolly wrote, *"governments in capitalist society are but committees of the rich to manage the affairs of the capitalist class."* it is not in the interests of the political classes to give extra powers to trade unions. They want to smash unions. This is why they deny the right to union recognition, the right of access, and full collective bargaining rights. For the same reason they introduced the 1990 act. If it is abolished it will allow us to fight for recognition and other rights on our terms.

The political parties will not deprive their paymasters of lucrative income by building universal public housing or properly financing the public health service, transport, or education. They prefer to return corporation tax to the corporations by means of state subsidies to low pay (FIS), excessive rents (HAP, RAS), and medical costs (DRS).

We will have to fight for these rights. We should not be so far ahead of workers that we are out of sight, or left behind, redundant and defeated; but we must be right up in front, leading the working class out of the misery and poverty of neo-liberalism to equality, decency and dignity in our lives. ★

they are not socialist

This debate is not new, and will never be resolved, as it itself represents the contradictions of unions with employers, of unions with the state, of unions with the Communist Party, and of workers within unions themselves. And that's fine. In fact it's a good thing.

There is nothing determined about the future of the trade union movement. We have the chance to shape it and, as communists, should seek to shape it. However, we do so in the context in which it exists and has been formed and developed.

The trade union movement will not be revolutionary, because its purpose and function is to compromise with capital. There has never been, and so we haven't lost, a trade union movement that fights for the overthrow of capitalism.

Even the great union strikes that have come and gone, even general strikes, were not for ownership of the means of production: they were for defending pay and conditions, or for modest advances in pay and conditions. There is no amazing yesteryear of revolutionary trade unionism, and we shouldn't hark back to a reality that didn't exist.

Recent articles have touched on the subjects of strikes, legislation, the right to access, and bargaining. All legislation, in the existing state, is a compromise with capitalism. Sometimes it is a strong one, sometimes it is a weak one. As communists within the trade union movement we should be arguing for the strongest possible legislation to assist workers in combining, protecting and advancing their rights and conditions within capitalism. This will include the right to access, the right to bargain, and the right to strike. As pointed out, legislation so far has failed. But legislation itself is no panacea for the ills of the movement.

It is not impossible for left trade unionists to unite and push for the right of access, the right to bargain and the right to strike in a comprehensive radical programme for labour reform and where some parties, such as Sinn Féin, support parts of it and propose progressive legislation to support such rights. But make no mistake: repealing the 1990 act would not see a dramatic upsurge in strike activity. Providing for the right to access will not cure declining union membership. That is the struggle of trade unionists to engage with workers in their places of work and to develop demands with those workers that inspire belief in the ability to combine and the success that such combination can bring. ★

Picture: Lenin speaking at the Putilov Works in St Petersburg. Painting by Isaak Brodsky

Illusions of choice and happiness

When people are discussing happiness, there are few things that come to mind as immediately as freedom and autonomy. As Starbucks said, "happiness is in your choices." We are told that without freedom we cannot be happy, and that freedom, boiled down to the basics, simply means choice. **Laura Duggan** argues that this narrative has become central to the consumerism necessary for the capitalist system.

FREEDOM BECOMES confined to choice, and those choices are then confined by capitalism, which occasionally makes normally rational people start defending the notion that to have only one brand of milk, or phone or bus service available would crush some essential part of us and make us incapable of joy, no matter their price or quality. It's also a very easy way to introduce and normalise the privatisation of services. Competition! Choice! Better for consumers!

The logic follows that the more choices available the greater the number of people to make the most appropriate choices for themselves, maximising individual freedom and therefore happiness. Capitalism relies on the perpetuation of this notion of choice and the concept of consumption-happiness in order to keep us buying one brand over the other.

The delicious irony is that having multiple brands to choose from creates more anxiety about choosing correctly, rather than reassuring consumers about their freedom or choice validity. That most choices are probably owned by the same parent company is overlooked. The illusion of variety is the ersatz spice of life.

This choice-happiness dynamic is not one based on a desire for a better outcome for a greater number of people, or the natural order of things: it is simply a nice tidy way to reinforce market norms.

In experiments comparing the different understandings of choice by citizens from the former Soviet republics and the United States, participants were offered a drink: Coca-Cola or Pepsi. They were then asked what the options had been. The majority of former USSR participants answered that (excuse the Americanism) it had been "soda or no soda." This pattern didn't change after five more soda options were added to the original two. Only when coffee and blackcurrant juice were offered did the choice seem to expand: to soda, coffee, blackcurrant, or nothing.

The American participants had registered each soda option as a choice of its own, and had not registered the possibility of choosing nothing. They were also much more likely to be upset when their chosen option was not available, or when given a different drink from what they requested.

The experiment occasionally misattributed the response of the former USSR participants to unfamiliarity with the products, unfamiliarity with self-expression, or an acceptance of disappointment, all of which are inaccurate and insulting biases of the American researchers. From other research we can see that the people of the USSR had a much higher engagement in political activity and in work-place decisions, where the choices were of greater value and impact than types of fizzy drink.

The science about choice is fuzzy. Like that about attraction, we can only make broad generalisations: in western society, blonde hair in women is seen as an attractive feature. And, like the research done with attraction, for a person to actively participate in a choice an attractive appearance isn't enough without an emotional connection.

This is why the rivalry between Coke and Pepsi is a fantastic marketing strategy for both of them: people are forced to take sides, and the Coke-Pepsi false dichotomy becomes a part of their identity. Sporting brands are particularly talented at insinuating themselves with consumers. Give people enough time and they start to tell themselves stories of why brand X is the only choice for them. They will do so under the impression that they have never been influenced by any advertising at all.

The loveliest trick of the Devil is to persuade you that they don't exist—a lesson advertising has taken to heart. It is so ever-present that it has become almost invisible.

Last month's article on late-stage capitalism covered the hypocrisy of this brand image and the practical realities of support for the said brand through the Kaepernick and Nike fiasco.

But there is a more sinister undertone in this message that reaches outside consumer goods. The dogma of choice is edging into medical decisions. Psychologists have studied this paradox of choice with regard to cosmetic surgery, where the notion of choice has pushed up the number of women seeking elective surgery, the normalisation of which further pushes other women to likewise volunteer themselves for the knife.

The same has happened with companies that offer oocyte cryopreservation, or "egg-freezing," and, ironically, in reverse with vaccinations: take-up has fallen. In moving vaccinations from mandatory to optional, the notion that all opinions are equally valid has been steadily reinforced. Health has become a life-style choice.

Professor Baba Shiv has written a number of papers on the de-professionalisation of medicine, and how the transformation of medical care in the United States into a service model now has patients with no medical experience directing their own care, occasionally to their own detriment. Those choices are again as dictated by finance, as are all other consumer choices.

The same methodology can be applied to elections; and when it works it is seamless. A weak, middle-of-the-road candidate will generally do better if competing against the particularly vile. When this goes wrong and the racist or homophobic or sexist or any amalgamation of these right-wing ideologies wins, voters themselves are commonly blamed for being too stupid to vote otherwise.

Again the system does not have to acknowledge its own failures: the creation of a base of support for the right-wing candidate, the awful weaknesses of the supposed left candidate (and this concept of left never becomes as flexible as it does during elections), or the system that promotes this laughable version of democracy but in fact buys in to the same individualisation of myth-building perpetuated by advertising.

Like buying a phone and realising that you got a bad deal, the problem, you are told, is not the phone, the company that makes it or the capitalist system that encourages a predatory sales technique but rather your own inability to find a bargain, to navigate through the technical specs, the jargon, pushy sales staff, built-in obsolescence, and your own financial realities.

Choice does lead to more happiness, up to a certain point, but it's never linear or clear-cut; and, given increasing and unnecessary choices, we become more and more miserable.

Happiness under capitalism is an illusion as much as the choice it is contingent upon. The solution to this problem is clear: we must stop "choosing" capitalism. ★

CAPITALISM

Organising to halt our descent into misery

Tommy McKearney

THERESA MAY once told a Tory party conference that people viewed Conservatives as "the nasty party." She claimed this was an unfortunate misunderstanding, to be rectified by improving the party's public-relations campaign.

While few readers of *Socialist Voice* would fall for that type of self-serving nonsense, too many others accept a similar explanation for the misanthropy of the capitalist ruling class, wherever they reside. Although the uber-wealthy often have an ingrained contempt for working people, it is important to recognise that their behaviour is, at base, motivated by strategic calculation rather than dictated by emotion.

In a nutshell, the driving forces at the top in capitalist society are actively engaged in a class conflict designed to perpetuate their position, wealth, and power. This clash becomes especially sharp whenever the nature of the world's economy undergoes significant change, as has been happening in recent decades. Globalisation, assisted and driven by rapid technological advances, has not only moved the principal centres of physical production: it has also created a new category of highly skilled and educated workers in the ITC sector. These people are often meagrely paid and, in classic terms, are facing proletarianisation, if not already members of that community.

The outcome has been to leave many manual workers in the United States and western Europe either redundant or in badly paid precarious employment; and they are understandably discontented and restless. At the same time there has emerged that section of the working class that, if moved to action, would have very real industrial power within their grasp.

Just consider, for example, the effect of mobile-phone providers going on strike. Taken in tandem, this creates a potential threat to the status quo.

Moreover, running parallel with rapid advances in communications technology over the past few decades there has been an astonishing surge in access to the mass social media. Admittedly much content of these media is either tedious, frivolous, or actually dangerous, but they nevertheless have a powerful ability to disseminate information on the harsh reality of life for working people.

Not since the development of printing in the fifteenth century has there been a similar expansion in the potential for "common folk" to share information and ideas. And, just as the Vatican learnt five hundred years ago, informed and communicating grass roots can become threatening grass roots.

Not that there is any shortage of cause for working people to feel aggrieved. Consider just two statistics in relation to the Republic's two-tier economy. There are 80,000 millionaires in a state that has 10,000 homeless; and there are more than half a million citizens on outpatient waiting-lists. No matter how placid the working-class majority may appear at present, the ruling elite realise that, ultimately, it is not possible to maintain a situation of such gross inequality.

As the internet billionaire Nick Hanauer wrote to his fellow-oligarchs in 2014, "*no society can sustain this kind of rising inequality. In fact, there is no example in human history where wealth accumulated like this and the pitchforks didn't eventually come out . . .*"[1]

Faced with a choice between facilitating an economy based on

The Venezuelan government is not responding to workers' demands

tribuna popular

Órgano del Comité Central del Partido Comunista de Venezuela

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XIII Congreso

Ministerio del Trabajo sigue sin responder

Por más de dos meses el FNLCT y sus organizaciones han solicitado una reunión con el ministro Piñate para que escuche y procese las denuncias, formulaciones críticas y propuestas | p. 5

Asambleas Regionales del FNLCT para fortalecer luchas clasistas | p. 4

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Brasil enfrenta la amenaza neoliberal | p. 10

EL MOVIMIENTO AGRARIO-CAMPESINO SE ORGANIZA Y LUCHA

Con miras al Congreso campesino continúan los encuentros zonales de la Corriente Clasista Campesina «Nicomedes Abreu» para confrontar el burocratismo, la corrupción, el sicariato y la judicialización de las luchas populares | p. 7

Precios acordados no son respetados

El Gobierno debe actuar contra la ola hiperinflacionaria y facilitar el control obrero-popular sobre la producción y distribución de bienes y servicios | p. 3

Paul Dobson

IN LATE October the Communist Party of Venezuela (PCV) called for an "urgent" meeting with President Nicolás Maduro to discuss a series of government shortcomings in the area of workers' and campesinos' rights.

The proposed meeting, according to the general secretary of the PCV, Óscar Figuera, should be held "with the gloves off" and in the context of the electoral agreement between the ruling United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) and the PCV.

The communists accuse the government of not fulfilling any of the points of the February accord. The government is yet to respond to the call from its allies, despite continuing negotiations that seek to achieve a unified PSUV-PCV list of candidates for the coming local elections.

Speaking to the press last month, Figuera drew Maduro's attention to the "inaction" and "lack of response" of public authorities to the demands of the organised campesinos and in particular those of the Admirable March. Their demands include the handing over of title deeds to land, an end to state and military-backed landlord violence, often including paramilitaries or hired thugs, and greater efficiency and less corruption in government schemes for helping campesinos to increase national production.

Following a successful reception by President Maduro, the joint working groups established by the government and the marching campesinos have stalled, forcing the latter to stage a short-lived hunger strike to force the government to address these issues.

Since Maduro met the campesinos, promising to put an end to landlord-backed attacks, a number of assassinations and

a meaningful redistribution of wealth and on the other hand retaining the present gross inequalities, capitalism will undoubtedly opt for suppression rather than concession.

Central to this strategy is control of society's resources. For evidence of this, simply consider the relentless drive towards privatisation: telecoms, tolled roads, health services, bus routes, care for the elderly—and the list goes on. Most significant of late has been the return to landlordism as the norm in housing. This most basic of human needs is now more often than not within the gift of a privileged few.

This is nothing less than the consolidation of wealth and resources in the hands of a small elite, which in effect deprives the working-class majority of options. Without public housing, and with mortgages being largely unaffordable for many, it becomes more difficult in practice to withdraw labour when the consequence of failure to pay rent is eviction.

Thereafter begins free-fall. Wages are held down through the spreading of fear and insecurity as every aspect of the social welfare safety net is pared to the bone. In effect, the ruling elite is striving to place the entire class in an economic chokehold.

Moreover, in the face of the changing nature of capitalism, social democracy has imploded almost everywhere as it attempted to appease those dogmatically pursuing the neo-liberal agenda. Even the rising star of Germany's once-powerful Social Democratic Party, Kevin Kühnert, confessed in a recent interview that "suddenly, the message was that people should take care of themselves, that markets can do things better than the state. We privatised, we deregulated the labour market, we abandoned rural areas."[2]

In the light of all this, the Peadar O'Donnell Socialist Republican Forum is adamant that the Irish working class needs to build for itself a strong extra-parliamentary mass movement. Today, the Irish state and its institutions serve the interests of those who have economic power and wealth.

The Forum believes it is necessary that the lessons of the magnificent Right to Water campaign be built upon and that the power of the people be maintained. This, however, requires an organisational vehicle that can co-ordinate activities and activists throughout the country, and to do so on an agreed programme that addresses the range of issues affecting working people.

To this end, the Forum is promoting a gathering of interested parties and individuals on Saturday 26 January 2019, firstly to celebrate the centenary of the first Dáil Éireann and the Democratic Programme and thereafter to facilitate the creation of an arena capable of building a mass extra-parliamentary movement.

Already the Forum has canvassed widely and has received an encouraging response. Nevertheless, more must be done. This initiative requires the widest possible effort by working people committed to establishing a democratic and sovereign Irish republic, free from domination by either a native bourgeoisie or their imperialist allies abroad.

Bear in mind that those forces opposed to the creation of a workers' state are not in the least sentimental. They have calculated their own strengths and weaknesses and have planned accordingly. We, the working class, must do the same if we are to prevent our descent into misery.

Let's gather in Liberty Hall on 26 January and agree a process that can carry out these promises for long-suffering working people.[3] ★

1 "Internet billionaire Nick Hanauer warns of coming revolution," BBC News, 30 June 2014 (at www.bbc.com/news/blogs-echochambers-28068277).
2 Tobias Buck, "How social democracy lost its way: A report from Germany," *Financial Times*, 17 October 2018.
3 For more detail see https://socialistrepublicanforum.wordpress.com/

attacks have taken place, particularly in the provinces of Barinas and Zulia (Sur de Lago). "Campesino leaders have received threats and persecutions [from landlords], and the competent authorities such as the police, the National Guard and others, do not act," Figuera declared. He characterised those authorities as "complicit" and "permissive" in the "aggressive policies" of the landed classes.

He reiterated that the campesinos will "always find the communists on their side."

The PCV also called on the attorney-general, Tarek William Saab—who is at present reviewing a series of investigations by his predecessor, Luisa Ortega Díaz, now a fugitive—to "take a look at those who should be investigating in Barinas," where local landlords recently murdered the campesino leaders Reyes Orlando Parra, Pedro Vielma, and José del Real Aguilar.

Last month the police authorities formally charged those captured for the murders, who are now awaiting trial. Attacks continued, however, in Sur de Lago, where campesinos condemned the wounding of a campesino leader, allegedly by the previous owners of a disputed plot of land.

Figuera also denounced the fact that the PCV campesino leader in Barinas, Robinson García, suffered an attempt on his life last week when bikers hired by landlords fired fifteen shots into his truck. García is heavily involved in defending the campesinos' demands in the region.

Another of the main points the communist party wishes to discuss is what it considers "insufficient" adjustments in the wage scales of public employees following the coming into effect of macro-economic reforms in August.

Public-sector workers in many industries have held a series of demonstrations to demand new collective contracts and an adjustment in bonus schemes following the reconversion of the national currency. In several companies new collective contracts have been agreed between the Ministry of Labour and the pro-government Bolivarian Trade Union Federation, which the PCV claims has lost touch with workers' demands. "There have been meetings, the topic is being worked upon," but the results have been "unacceptable," he said, citing oil and transport workers, among others.

He also urged the national government, which the PCV does not participate in, to "listen to the people" and promote the "leading role" of the organised work force, claiming that the PCV has information showing that the new wage scales do not follow the proposals and demands discussed by the workers at the grass-roots level.

Figuera's demand was illustrated this week after workers took over the abandoned factory of Smurfit Kappa Cartones de Venezuela in Valencia, Carabobo state. The government responded to the workers' request that it assume legal ownership of the factory, which was left derelict when the company's owners left the country without following the due procedures to cease production, in what is classed as an illegal closure under Venezuelan law.

Following the petition the minister of labour, Eduardo Piñate, visited the offices of the company in Valencia, making the takeover official, in compliance with article 149 of the Labour Law.

Last month, during a meeting with the workers' congress, Maduro had railed against private-sector sabotage and urged workers to take over companies abandoned by the owners. "From now it will be a goal for the working class to recuperate the productivity of this firm," Piñate stated on signing the transfer papers. He also commended the workers for their firm support of the Bolivarian process.

"We, the Valencia-based factories of corrugated cardboard, produce 80 per cent of the national packaging," one worker claimed, "and we can say that 80 per cent of the factories are [now] operational with the support of the workers." They are also planning on producing packaging for the pharmaceutical and food industries, he said. "The work-place of Smurfit Kappa Cartones de Venezuela SA is reactivated after the illegal closing by the bosses, so as to protect the jobs of hundreds of workers and their families." ★

War destroys not only lives

Jenny Farrell

THE 11 NOVEMBER 2018 is the centenary of the ending of the First World War. During that bloody slaughter the propagandists described it as "the war to end all wars." A hundred years and as many wars later, the militarists in the United States and Europe—many of them the authors and overseers of present conflicts, from Afghanistan to Yemen—meet to promote that war as something noble.

Although many Irishmen fought in the war, very few wrote about it. One of our most outspoken anti-war writers is Liam O'Flaherty, who contributed two texts to world literature that condemn war as inhuman and present the real and barbaric nature of war.

Liam knew what he was writing about. He not only fought in the trenches of Flanders as a member of the British army but was wounded and shell-shocked in September 1917. His abhorrence of war is expressed poignantly in his very short story "The Discarded Soldier" and his avant-garde novel *Return of the Brute*" (1929).

Return of the Brute is set in the trenches and traces the dehumanisation of the soldiers. All that matters here is looting the dead for food and cigarettes. War destroys humankind, not simply by destroying lives but also by destroying that within our relationships with other people that makes us human: the capacity for compassion, for support of our fellows, for having a creative purpose, and for grieving. All these are depicted in their grotesque disintegration and deformation.

This avant-garde novel includes some silent, eerie choreographies of death's dance, such as: *"They all gaped in wonder at the horses, which looked like skeletons, dimly outlined against the horizon on the left, with their cloaked riders stooping forward from the*

Paul Stewart, Tommy McKearney, Gearóid Ó Machail, Patricia Campbell, Brian Garvey, *Between Sectarianism and Neo-Liberalism: The State of Northern Ireland and the Democratic Deficit* (Glasgow: Vagabond Voices, 2018)

Between sectarianism and neo-liberalism

Pat Lynch

IF, LIKE ME, you mourn the loss of intelligent debate among Irish republicans as they descend into the gobbledegook of bourgeois democracy, you'll no doubt welcome the well-crafted and thoughtful consideration of this contribution from left republicans whose commitment to the articulation of a socialist republican analysis of our times is well established.

The authors, all of whose integrity and contribution to struggle put them beyond censorship, dare to critique the heretofore unassailable Good Friday Agreement and its almost Catholic pretensions to articles of faith.

In a series of well-written essays, the text sets out its analysis of the present-day Six Counties and developments since 1998 in the Good Friday Agreement and presents a series of actions to redress its deficits, backed up by statistics, testimony, and reference to the material reality of Six-County workers.

The thrust of the book is based on McKearney's erudite treatise *The Provisional IRA: From Insurrection to Parliament* (2011) and a defence of the republican armed struggle in bringing an end to what he describes as the Orange State, ending a particular form of sectarianism manifest in the occupied Six Counties, thus paving the way to potential for the development of progressive and class politics, which was previously impossible in the confines of sectarian domination.

Having reviewed the current political situation, the book concludes that, instead of the anticipated development of progressive politics, what has in fact emerged is a further transition to a new sectarianism, allowing Catholic nationalists into the circle, dispersing the dividends of what "the state" advances them, and concludes that the formerly oppressed "minority" has taken on, with zest and equal corruption, its sectarian task of representing its own sectarian constituency.

Furthermore, they argue that the

rain. They moved very slowly in a line, staggering through shell-holes, slipping in the mud and rearing." And, in another scene: *"But nobody in the hole took any notice of the firing. Their limbs moved continuously, jerking, twisting about. Their mouths and nostrils twitched. They kept getting to their feet and sitting down again; all except Lamont who sat very still. They could no longer speak."*

"The Discarded Soldier" was never collected and is virtually unknown. It describes the sheer indifference with which a wounded soldier is dumped by the very people who callously used him as cannon fodder and who previously cried out about the glory of warfare: *"Then at last he was caught by a bursting shell and hurled into the air, amid red-hot bolts of steel and showers of earth and smoke. He was crushed into a jabbering mass of pulped flesh. He was no longer a hero. He was a wreck. Capitalism did not want him. The ladies no longer cheered him. They brought him flowers in the hospital for a few months and then forgot. The ribbons faded on his breast. He was cast into the great city, homeless, unwanted, penniless."*

Seán O'Casey's play *The Silver Tassie*, written in 1927–28, deals with the very same theme. Interestingly, "The Discarded Soldier" was published for the first (and probably only) time in the *Daily Worker*, the daily paper of the Communist Party of the USA, on 27 June 1925, at the request of Tom O'Flaherty, Liam's brother, who worked as a daily columnist on the paper. Both were writers, and both were involved in the communist movement, being founder-members of two separate communist parties, Tom of the CPUSA and Liam of the CPI.

In an advertisement in the *Daily Worker* on 13 June 1925 Tom describes Liam as "a young proletarian writer who has already won an international reputation thru his books and short stories . . . One of those short stories, dealing with the civil war in Ireland, in which he fought on the side of the Republicans, is listed in the collection of the best short stories produced In Great Britain during 1923 . . . The now only twenty-six years old . . . left a little fishing village in the Arran Islands on the west coast of Ireland at an early age for college, where he was trained by the Jesuits for the propaganda mission. He is anything but grateful to his tutors as his writings show."

Seosamh Ó Cuaig, chairperson of the Liam and Tom O'Flaherty Society, uncovered this story while researching Tom O'Flaherty. *People's World,* the successor of the *Daily Worker,* will republish this story in full on 11 November (see www.peoplesworld.org/).

The O'Flaherty Society previewed this story in 2014 with an evocative reading by Fionnghuala Ní Choncheanainn, filmed by Eoin McDonnell of the Connolly Media Group in an atmospheric Aran setting (https://vimeo.com/183527458), at its annual O'Flaherty Festival in Árainn in 2014.★

PICTURE *Gassed* John Songer Sargent 1919

THE CONNOLLY WALKER DEBATE

On Saturday 20 October a new edition of the debate between James Connolly and William Walker, containing all the articles published originally in 1911, was launched by Connolly Books, Dublin. This is a crucial document in its presentation of Connolly's understanding of the inextricable connection between national independence and the struggle for socialism. It is available from Connolly Books, price €8 (£7).

dynamic behind and the consensus within which this sectarian parity of disrespect exists is neo-liberalism.

Much effort and research has been spent on extracting UK statistics on levels of deprivation and work-place regression in terms and conditions and the general dysfunction of the northern economy. This is coupled with a description of sectarian dominance of the so-called NGO sector and disregard for the trauma of conflict.

As in *The Provisional IRA*, rather than leaving us in despair, where the author points to the demise of the Orange state as a tangible gain, this text attempts to offer us hope, in the face of a newly formed sectarianism, by suggesting that through a defence of and demand for social democratic reforms we might usher in a progressive shift in northern political relations. They point to "green shoots" of emerging anti-neoliberal trade unionism, left-leaning elected representatives, progressive tendencies within loyalism and demographic change that may drive new alliances.

Convinced of its argument, it further sets out its manifesto of demands around which progressive politics might occur, from a Civic Forum, a Bill of Rights, the provision of health and elderly care, properly funded education, employment rights, public housing, and progressive taxation.

All good stuff—let's get at it, I thought, till I found my determinist heart stretching for Lenin's discourses on imperialism and Connolly's battle with Walker. My euphoria subsided.

Many theorists have driven themselves mad in the pursuit of proof of an unfounded theory, and it seems that this might be a case in point. For me, the founding thesis that the Orange state was overthrown, rather than simply replaced by its beneficiary (imperialism), obscures the nature of oppression in Ireland. As the text fails to highlight the fact that imperialism continues as the determining and dynamic force driving political, social and economic relations in the Six Counties, this leads me to wonder whether the authors, in their desire to find a way forward, have forgotten that sectarianism in Ireland, in whatever form, is simply the pretext on which imperialism continues to subjugate its hosts, or that sectarianism in Ireland is simply a function of capitalist control here.

It might be argued that the fact that the imperialist nature of Irish-British relations is all-powerful, and confirmed in its ability to adapt, by jumping ethnic group while still maintaining its control of the means of production and exchange, only confirms this.

If sectarianism in Ireland is indeed a function of imperialism, and as imperialism still persists as the dominant force in defining the constructs of society here, the notion of reform or even the development of progressive internal politics is impossible. The authors' charter of progressive demands appears, despite their claim to the opposite, to be an economist charter, denying the nature of the state.

It would appear that the debate on Brexit (a discussion of which is strangely absent from this text), the singular declaration of our imperial masters, either European or British, to follow their manifest destinies in deciding our fate and the nature of our oppression, confirms the futility of attempting to reform the unreformable. If we need hope and direction on where to act, we might better look to Lenin, who advises revolution rather than reform. "Capitalism itself gradually provides the subjugated with the means and resources for their emancipation and they set out to achieve the goal which once seemed highest to the European nations: the creation of a united national state as a means to economic and cultural freedom" (V. I. Lenin, *Imperialism, The Highest Stage of Capitalism*).

This book is a must-read; it succeeds in its objective of provoking constructive debate towards a scientific resolution of our country's oppression. ★

Manipulation
and the role of social media

Lauren Smith

SOCIAL MEDIA and Google serve three strategic purposes for the US government. Firstly, they allow the United States to conduct espionage; secondly, they facilitate the spread of disinformation; and thirdly, they serve as conduits for the transmission of social contagions.

In employing thought control against the users of social media and Google, the US government shapes and regulates voting outcomes and civil unrest. Social media and Google can therefore best be understood as unconventional weapons for use in proxy wars to achieve regime change against non-compliant non-aligned governments, such as Venezuela and Nicaragua.

Through geopolitical manipulations to overcome opposition, the US government seeks to bring about the ruling elite's vision of a corporate-controlled global economy without deploying troops. This "non-violent" or "soft-coup" model of unconventional warfare is organised through the efforts of American quasi-non-governmental organisations (quangos), such as the National Endowment for Democracy. Used in various so-called "colour revolutions" in eastern European countries, the Middle East, and now Latin America, the model's "user-friendly" packaging and features, through social media and Google, conceal their fundamentally military and security-oriented application. The NED makes no secret of its advocacy of the use of social media to fight proxy wars.

At a minimum, non-aligned governments should promote wide public awareness of this reality but should also fight back by using commercially available software that is able to search, monitor, analyse and manage the content of social media. To counter American corporate and government manipulation of social media, non-aligned governments can and should integrate this software in their communications strategies.

Concurrently, either unilaterally or together, they should guard against cyber-invasion by passing cyber laws with strong penalties, as done by Germany with its ground-breaking Network Enforcement Act. Non-aligned countries, such as the member-states of the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of our Americas (ALBA), should perhaps follow Germany's example of robust laws and fines.

Cambridge Analytica and social contagion

Two things are important in understanding the US government's offensive against unfavourable non-aligned countries: firstly, the origins of Facebook and Google, and secondly, their collective influence over human motivation through coercion and the spread of social contagion through distorted reality.

Facebook's influence can best be understood through the two scandals over Cambridge Analytica and the Social Contagion Study.

The Cambridge Analytica scandal revealed that Facebook exposed the personal data of 87 million users to a political consultancy firm of which the Trump adviser Steve Bannon was founder and vice-president. They used personal data to influence Facebook users' votes

Samantha Power and the Irish cousins

MINERS I.T.G.W.U. 1935

Front- Michael Delaney(Doonane): Jimmy Walsh(Moneenroe): Joe Brennan"Long" Nixie Boran(Moneenroe)

Jimmy Kelly(Moneenroe): Martin Brennan"Roe"(Sidegate): Mickey Loughlin .

Back- John Fitzgerald(Railyard): Frank Dormer(Clogh): Jack Kavanagh(Maryville): Edward Brennan "Darby"

John Fitzgearld"Trammer": Louis Phillips(Clogh): Tom Brennan"Halad"(Castlecomer): Joe Fitzgearld(Railyard).

Dan Taraghan

SAMANTHA POWER was born in Ireland but was taken to America at a young age by her parents, a doctor and a dentist. She attended Yale University and subsequently became a war journalist.

Later she was an adviser to Barack Obama, who appointed her US ambassador to the United Nations in 2013.

In effect, she is part of the American establishment and has the usual imperialist world outlook to be expected from someone of her class. She recently appeared in a history programme on RTE, "Who Do You Think You Are?" The programme traces the ancestors of the participants. Power was told by a parish priest that she was related to a family called Boran from the Castlecomer area of Co. Kilkenny. She had never heard the name before, but he told her that members of the family still lived in the area, which prompted her to explore the matter further.

She contacted a local historian, who produced a scrapbook that contained what looked like a copy of a poster of James Connolly next to a large hammer and sickle. It turned out that the historian was herself the daughter of Nixie (Nicholas) Boran, a cousin of Power.

Power seemed to be taken aback by this, and especially when she discovered that Nixie Boran was a communist and a founding member of the communist Revolutionary Workers' Group. She managed to avoid using the word "communist" for the whole programme.

It is probably not realised by anyone passing through

in the US presidential election of 2016 in favour of Donald Trump.

The main client of SCL, Cambridge Analytica's parent company, is NATO, as well as the defence departments of NATO member-states.

Another company involved in the scandal is Palantir, whose chairman and founder, Peter Thiel, was a major contributor to Trump's presidential campaign. Palantir not only has numerous contracts with the US intelligence community and Department of Defense but was Facebook's leading investor, remains on its board of directors, and is also on the steering committee of the elite corporate strategy group Bilderberg.

Another scandal involving Facebook is the Social Contagion Study, in which Facebook altered the news feed content of 700,000 unsuspecting users. The study controlled posts containing words with positively or negatively charged emotions to spy on reactions. They concluded their study by saying that emotions are spread by contagion through social networks.

Facebook was publicly condemned for using Orwellian thought-policing on its users. The Department of Defense's Minerva Research Initiative paid for research by Cornell University for a similar study, entitled Modelling Discourse and Social Dynamics in Authoritarian Regimes.

Cornell University also worked on a study financed by the US Air Force Office of Scientific Research, which aimed to develop an empirical model of the dynamics of social movement mobilisation and contagions. The object was to determine the "critical mass" or tipping-point of social contagions by studying their "digital traces."

Facebook and Google: Origin and influence

The CIA has a non-profit venture capital corporation called In-Q-Tel. Its senior managers are founders or board members of Facebook, and it is linked to Facebook through Peter Thiel of Palantir.

In August 2004 Thiel acquired a 10 per cent share in Facebook, for $500,000. The next two capital injections were $12.7 million from Thiel and Accel Partners in May 2005 and then $27.5 million from an Accel-led round of financing that included Thiel, Accel and Greylock Partners in April 2006.

In 2012 Thiel sold the majority of his shares for more than $1 billion, but he remains on Facebook's board of directors.

Google's founders, Larry Page and Sergey Brin, were both on the payroll of the National Science Foundation while working on its Stanford Digital Library Project, which involved creating search algorithms for scanning large quantities of data to find relationships. Financed by the US government, the NSF in its mission statement includes among its objects "to secure the national defense." It has a long-standing relationship with the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA).

Google's development was nurtured not only by the NSF and DARPA but also by the secretive Massive Digital Data Systems scheme, administered by private contractors for the CIA and NSA.

In 2004 Google bought Keyhole from In-Q-Tel. Its mapping technology software, Earthviewer, became Google Earth. Both In-Q-Tel and Google financed the "threat intelligence" company Recorded Futures, and have seats on its board.

Besides geographical and location tracking, Google assists the US government in its efforts to write—and rewrite—history. According to Google's transparency report, the US government has nominated 79,901 items for removal since 2009. In the same period Venezuela nominated ten items for removal, and Nicaragua just one.

According to the authors of the report, Olivia Solon and Sam Levin, Google's search and auto-complete algorithms give priority to sites with right-wing bias, while far-right groups trick it to boost propaganda and misinformation in search rankings. As explained by Robert Epstein of the American Institute for Behavioral Research and Technology, Google has the power to rig elections through something he calls the search engine manipulation effect. Appearing on the first page of Google search results can give web sites undue authority.

Besides taking active security measures, activists and non-aligned countries can learn from the US government and control the technology by posting supportive material on social media and Google. Most people using the internet already know that everything deviating from the prevailing imperialist narrative is automatically considered subversive and is likely to be blocked. On social media our "friends" in the US government are watching, ready to control anything tactical we post on the internet. One striking example of that control is the fact that Facebook has twice removed the English-language page of Venezuela's Telesur channel.

But while the US government takes the lead in unconventional warfare technology, it also offers opportunities that can be exploited. What can't be appropriated can be protested against. Their elaborate global surveillance system was devised because the ruling elite know they are outnumbered. Knowing this gives us power. ★

■ Lauren Smith has a degree in politics, economics and society from the State University of New York and a postgraduate degree in international development administration from New York University. Her novel on Nicaragua's 1979 revolution is due out in 2019.

Castlecomer today that this was once a mining town. In fact mining had been carried on here since the seventeenth century. In 1637 Thomas Wentworth, lord deputy of Ireland, granted thousands of acres to Charles Wandesforde, a farmer from Yorkshire.

Castlecomer is the centre of the Leinster coalfield, and the lands were very valuable both for the coal and for the oak woodlands. Originally seams were leased to master miners; later the Wandesforde family became directly involved in the operation.

By the twentieth century the conditions for miners were gruesome. You had to crawl into the mine and work lying on your side, thereby scraping the skin on your shoulder and hip. You had to inhale coal dust, leading to pneumoconiosis. There were no toilet or washing facilities; and there was the use of child labour.

The Wandesfordes were lords and masters, setting the terms and conditions of employment. The miners paid for the gelignite, fuses, detonators, and candles. Rent, and a payment to the Church, were also deducted, leaving a take-home pay of about half nominal earnings.

Nixie Boran was born in the area in 1903 and, like other miners' children, was sent to work in the mines as a child. By 1930 he had become interested in communism, and, along with Paddy O'Carroll, Jimmy Walshe, and Tom Walshe, he formed the Revolutionary Workers' Group.

In August 1930 the miners were invited to send a delegate to the Red International of Labour Unions in Moscow. Boran was selected, but the government refused him a visa. However, he managed to get smuggled into the Soviet Union, where he stayed for several months, visiting collective farms and mining areas. He also met revolutionaries and Irish students at the Lenin School in Moscow.

On return to Ireland he was arrested and was questioned about his trip to the Soviet Union but gave no information. Local miners surrounded the Garda barracks so that they were forced to release him. On his release he told the miners what he had seen in the Soviet Union.

He now set about establishing a miners' union. Bob Stewart of the Communist Party of Great Britain went to Kilkenny and helped the miners in establishing it, and by the end of 1930 they had succeeded in setting up the Irish Mine and Quarry Workers' Union. They also set up the Revolutionary Workers' Group and organised the sale and distribution of a paper, the *Workers' Voice*. The union fought for improved conditions and were resolute against attacks from local priests, employers, and gardaí.

Boran described the IM&QWU as a militant union with the long-term aim of the destruction of capitalism. He said a union without a revolutionary policy was deceiving workers; policies of reformism would only lead to compromise and a general worsening of workers' conditions.

The union was involved in many strikes from the 1930s up to the closure of the mines; it also led a successful challenge to the property rights of the Wandesforde family, and even resisted the attacks on communism from the priests.

Nixie Boran died in 1971 but, along with the other miners, is still remembered. ★

On Mandy, capitalist media, and the working class

Oisín Ó Murchú

PANOS COSMATOS'S film *Mandy* (2018) has received widespread acclaim for its visually arresting murder-and-revenge story, set in a heavily aestheticised 1980s rural America (thanks to the cinematography of Benjamin Loeb). This article is not so much a review of the film as a critical assessment of some of the political implications of its narrative, and the role played by screen entertainment and the news media in the class struggle.

***Mandy* is notable for its repetition of a favourite trope of dominant film and television production, one that might be termed "backwoods evil."**

The antagonists are (to borrow the language of cultural stereotyping) variously hillbillies, hicks, yokels, and a witch, all under the thrall of a cult leader, Jeremiah Sand, played by Linus Roache. He is a Charles Manson figure, whose lank hair, flowing robes and costume jewellery signify both a certain cheapness—a sort of "dime-store Jesus"—and the curdled promise of the (predominantly white apolitical) hippie movement.

He and his charges are unmistakably archetypes of the rural poor, and, crucially, they operate on the margins, if not the outside, of normal society.

The depiction of evil with a proletarian face is inextricably woven into the American cinematic and televisual imagination. It is the screen manifestation of a fundamentally bourgeois neurosis. This dual process is manifested most clearly in such films as *Deliverance* (John Boorman, 1972) and *Blue Velvet* (David Lynch, 1986). The protagonists in each, drawn as avatars of the white middle class, are hounded and beset by representatives of a rapacious and violent subaltern class.

The extent to which these films engage critically with their constituent iconography is a point for debate; what is incontrovertible is that each provides evidence that the dominant cinematic vocabulary of class hatred is readily available for directors to draw upon, as a painter to his palette.

Furthermore, it should be noted that these are all products of a culture that, in the most warped sense imaginable, dramatised its colonial genocide of the native population in the genre of the Western and the Manichean logic of "cowboys versus Indians." In the cultural arm of the class struggle, the ruling class has always had a number of tools at their disposal, not least the aesthetic and mythical qualities offered by the medium of screen entertainment.

Prestige television products, such as "True Detective," Season 1, promote a similarly malign logic. In it the vast conspiracy of child sex slavery and murder uncovered by its heroes finds its apogee in the Louisiana backwoods, its ultimate villain a schizophrenic ground-keeper who walks with a limp.

This is not to mention their weekly serialised equivalents—"CSI," "Law and Order," etc.—in which the violence and perfidiousness of the moneyed or political classes is studiously depicted as exceptional, while the degeneracy of the poor is beyond dispute.

More objectionable still is the dictate that the police and the military be portrayed always in favourable terms, with the occasional permissible exception of a "bad apple" or two, who serve only to illustrate by contrast the righteousness of their colleagues.

The active collaboration between film and television studios and the American military, police and intelligence services has been widely documented and criticised, and should give pause to those who might idealistically, or naïvely, expect any truly self-critical "messaging" to emerge from an industry so deeply compromised by imperialist and authoritarian interests.

The recent media attention paid to revelations of sexual abuse by wealthy and powerful men in Hollywood confirmed what was to many already widely known: that the entertainment industry as we know it is in part built on the back of the systematic sexual exploitation and silencing of women.

Appropriately, the detective stories produced within this culture, to an almost ritualistic degree, begin with a dead female body. In many cases, women in police shows are not there just to be killed but rather *to already be dead*. The woman as the victim of male violence, sexual assault or murder is the ground zero of narratives that then seek to depict the root of this evil as essentially proletarian in nature: maybe a black gang this week, or a janitor the next.

If these shows ever present the perpetrator as a man of power or influence it is with the commensurate fantasy that he faces justice of some kind in the end. They aim to obscure reality, rather than to reflect it honestly.

In *Mandy*, Cosmatos at least makes an attempt to humanise the victim of a ritual murder (played by Andrea Riseborough) before depicting the act itself. However, her character comes across as more of a loose collection of middle-aged men's projections of flighty, mystical feminine beauty than as a real person. From the outset, what defines her and Nicolas Cage's characters seems principally to be the consumption of pulp entertainment and minding their own business while living in a big log cabin in Reagan's America. Of course she will soon be killed, and her husband will have the opportunity to avenge her.

The narrative of backward yokels forming the seat of American evil ties neatly in, of course, with the liberal version of the story of how Donald Trump became president, now repeated ad nauseam, to a point where it has become the mental wallpaper of the average bourgeois. In this version of events the "white working class" voted for Trump's hateful, racist politics and against the alternative programme represented by Hillary Clinton, laughably presented as "progressive."

Of course we know that in fact it was *white people in general* who voted in overwhelming numbers for Trump, who benefited also from huge support among the bourgeoisie more generally. Furthermore, we understand the conflict between the Democratic and Republican Parties as one between competing interests of the imperialist ruling class, and not at all the simple Good v. Evil, progressive v. conservative, cosmopolitan v. hillbilly narrative so pervasive in the news and entertainment media. "The woman is dead, and it was the working class that killed her"—what nonsense!

It is clear that the function of the dominant media is to obscure the real class relations that shape our society, of the exploitation of workers by capitalists, with the aim of dividing the working class against each other. In our news media we can observe this in the relentless demonisation of striking workers, whether teachers, nurses, or bus and tram drivers, simply for trying to agitate for better pay and conditions. Workers are depicted as villains, enemies of wider society, simply for standing up for their own interests.

What the media so desperately try to obscure is that striking workers stand up for all our interests, and that a victory for them is a victory for all workers. But for the capitalists and their media apparatus the aim is always the same: "Divide and conquer." Paul Schrader's *Blue Collar* (1978), for example, illustrates this dynamic with devastating effect. It is this attempt at breaking working-class solidarity that we must identify when it is operating, and actively resist.

Entertainment media in Ireland are certainly no better. Examining the weekday programming of Virgin One and Two (formerly TV3 and 3e) gives a speculative glimpse at what a regular television schedule might look like under fascism. "Frontline Police," "Can't Pay? We'll Take It Away!" and the execrable "Paul Connolly Investigates"—all stalwarts of the television listings—are nothing more than the awful background hum of capitalism's war against the working class.

Ryan Tubridy recently interviewed the fascist politician Nigel Farage on the Late Late Show, while the Claire Byrne Show frequently gives a platform on the national broadcaster to the most appalling reactionaries. Recall the dismal spectacle of the anti-choice side of the referendum on repealing the Eighth Amendment, heckling and jeering their way through a televised debate to a point where it became almost totally unwatchable.

For the dominant media, this sort of thing is a desirable outcome. They peddle bigotry, misogyny and racism and refer to it as "controversy."

The recent presidential election was contested by, among others, three parasite businessmen from the RTE show "Dragons' Den." Arguably the most abhorrent of these, Peter Casey, built his platform in part on sexism, by decrying feminist politics, by anti-Semitism, by alleging that Jewish people possess undue influence on world affairs, and finally by denying the special ethnic status of the Travelling community and repeatedly casting slurs on them on live broadcast.

On his show Pat Kenny then went on to reproduce a talking point that can charitably be described as racist, asking each of the presidential candidates whether they themselves would want to live next to Travellers.

Whose interests, then, do news and entertainment media serve, in this country and abroad? We observe the constant repetition of pro-capitalist narratives, reactionary aesthetics, racist and misogynistic views, imperialist lies, anti-worker propaganda; and we say that this apparatus serves the interests of the ruling class, now as it has done in the past.

It is crucial that we challenge the lies and fabrications the capitalists offer to explain the state of affairs in which we find ourselves today. It is imperative that we attest that, if such a thing as evil exists, it is found in the boardrooms, suites, Oval Offices and military headquarters of the imperialists, and not in the hearts of the workers they try so desperately to turn against one another.

We must disabuse ourselves of the idealistic notion that capitalist media can ever serve the interests of the working class but must uphold those very interests ourselves wherever and whenever possible. ★

Sinn Féin is the big loser

PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

Tommy McKearney

SINN FÉIN is the big loser from the presidential election. Given a golden opportunity to present itself as the principal alternative to a triumvirate of Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil, and the Labour Party, it offered the Republic's electorate a package so bland that it blended in with the wallpaper.

Surely someone in Sinn Féin must now be asking how the movement has strayed so far from its core base. Did they really think they could succeed by wooing the middle class—a strategy that failed miserably in the past for both Labour and the Workers' Party?

The choice of Liadh Ní Riada was not the cause of their problem: it was the thinking that led them to choose her that lies at the heart of her party's rejection. Misreading the political situation, believing that rebranding as a middle-of-the-road, conviction-less liberal organisation, soft on business and, above all, "no longer Provo," would seal the deal, was a major blunder.

Moreover, this misconception did not begin with the presidential election. The party that was caught flat-footed at the beginning of the anti-water-tax campaign has changed direction on the EU, with all this implies for its economic outlook. In a two-tier economy, there is no middle ground.

Unable to decide which side of the fence to stand, it has opened the door for the type of Trump-like populism that took Peter Casey from obscurity to winning 23 per cent of votes cast in the recent election.

The need to continue constructing a dynamic socialist republican mass movement remains an imperative. ★

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