Socialist Voice

Communist Party of Ireland
Páirtí Cumannach na hÉireann
Partisan Patriotic Internationalist
Number 167 January 2019 €1.50
www.commmunistpartyofirerland.ie

Page 2 **Towards a new republic**
Page 4 **The body politic**
Page 4 **Universal basic income**
Page 6 **Britain's divided ruling class**
Page 8 **Cuba still fighting**
Page 10 **Cuban doctors leave Brazil**
Page 12 **Tech workers organise**
Page 14 **For an anti-imperialist ecology**
Page 14 **Boycott Eurovision**
Page 14 **Jenny Farrell on cinema**

A century of unfulfilled aspirations

"No quarter will be given, no prisoners will be taken. Let all who fall into your hands be at your mercy. Just as the Huns a thousand years ago, under the leadership of Etzel [Attila] gained a reputation by reason of which they still live in historical tradition, so may the name of Germany become known in such a manner in China that no Chinaman will ever again dare to look askance at a German."
Wilhelm Hohenzollern (Wilhelm II), emperor of Germany, addressing the German army, July 1900.

Much has been written and will be written about the establishment of Dáil Éireann in January 1919 and its adoption of the Democratic Programme. That programme offered the people a vision of a better and more just Ireland, presented as a natural progression from the Proclamation of the Irish Republic read outside the GPO in 1916 by Patrick Pearse and signed by the revolutionary leaders of the 1916 Rising. **Eugene McCartan** writes on the Democratic Programme for the 21st Century, drafted by the Peadar O'Donnell Socialist Republican Forum.

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ISSN 0791-5217

A century of unfulfilled aspirations

THE DEMOCRATIC PROGRAMME for the 21st Century, drafted by the Peadar O'Donnell Socialist Republican Forum, places the Democratic Programme in a continuum with the 1916 Proclamation. The Forum's Democratic Programme states: "In 1916 Patrick Pearse had written 'that the nation's sovereignty extends not only to all the material possessions of the nation, the nation's soil and all its resources, all wealth and all wealth-producing processes within the nation. In other words, no private right to property is good as against the public right of the nation.'"

Also writing in 1916, James Connolly declared that "the re-conquest [of Ireland] involves taking possession of the entire country, all its powers of wealth-production and all its natural resources, and organising these on a co-operative basis for the good of all." In April 1916 Connolly insisted to the Irish Citizen Army that "we are out for economic as well as political liberty."

The 1916 Proclamation laid out a vision of a new Ireland beyond British colonial domination. To achieve this new Ireland the Irish people needed to secure their freedom and independence from British occupation; the struggle for national freedom could not be separated from social and economic justice for the mass of the people of Ireland.

The Forum's programme again draws from the 1919 programme, which stated: "We declare in the words of the Irish Republican Proclamation the right of the people of Ireland to the ownership of Ireland, and to the unfettered control of Irish destinies to be indefeasible, and in the language of the first President, Pádraig Mac Phiarais, we declare that the Nation's sovereignty extends not only to all men and women of the Nation, but to all its resources, all the wealth and all the wealth-producing processes within the Nation, and with him we re-affirm that all rights to private property must be subordinated to the public right and welfare."

To those who lay claim to the radical tradition within our history the Proclamation for the 21st Century presents this understanding of the crucial questions facing radical forces today. With the revolutionaries of a hundred years ago, we believe that it is only in a truly democratic, sovereign, independent Irish Republic that the problems that beset the people can be addressed. Only then can the people collectively determine their own lives and together create a society that has the common good of all as its guiding principle and in which all our social relations are free and fully human.

Towards a new republic

Jimmy Doran

On 1 March 2019 the Employment (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act (2017) will come into effect. This is to be welcomed; it is a step in the right direction for workers' rights.

We must always be aware that we are up against a formidable enemy in capitalism. The nature of capitalism is to secure maximum profit, and the introduction of this act will slow down the exploitation of workers. It certainly will not stop it.

Employers will always find new ways to get around laws. Under this legislation, workers will have to keep their heads down for twelve months in order to secure a decent number of hours for their contract. Work of a "casual nature" is exempt, and of course short-term contracts are still legal.

This legislation was achieved in no small part as a result of the strike by members of Mandate in Dunne's Stores. This goes to show that nothing is gained by workers without a struggle. The legislation is a victory for workers and their unions; it improves conditions, in that secure hours = better future.

It does not, however, give workers power. Fianna Fáil and others in the establishment are willing (when forced) to give in and support legislation such as this; but they will fight tooth and nail against any change in the law that would tip the balance of power towards labour and away from capital.

One of the main strategies of the neo-liberal project is to weaken the trade union movement. This has been achieved in large part through anti-worker legislation, for example the Industrial Relations Act (1990). The winning of this new legislation should mark the beginning of rebuilding labour's power.

We still don't have full collective bargaining rights, union recognition, or the right of access. Achieving these would give real power to workers, to enable them to fight for much more and put us firmly in the driving seat of workers' demands.

If the working class are to regain any of the lost ground we must organise to have all anti-labour legislation repealed. This will give us back the power to take on the Government and employers. We must organise and push our demands much further than everyday work issues in order to raise class-consciousness, to build union membership and labour power.

Before the last budget SIPTU drew attention to the amount of money that was being lost to the exchequer from the special VAT rate for the tourism industry. The Government itself admitted that an extra €520 million could have been

‘A new Ireland—a sovereign and independent Ireland—will be brought into being only by the working class, through the struggle of the working class.’

Democracy means that the people have real decision-making power over their own lives and all aspects of their society. Real democracy cannot be confined to the political domain only; if the people are to control their own lives, democratic control must extend to the economy as well as to the political, social and cultural spheres. A society in which the people do not have control over all decision-making is not a democratic one.

Sovereignty is the ability of a people or state to govern and make the laws within their borders; without it, the people are not sovereign, and no democratic decision-making is possible.

Independence is the exercise of sovereignty and democracy free from external coercion, restraint, or interference. This does not mean isolation from the wider world, or a lack of engagement with it, but being able to act freely within it and to interact with others on our own terms.

In the Ireland of today, dominated by imperialism, there is no real democracy, sovereignty, or independence; the people cannot determine their own lives or control their society; and there are no answers to the social problems that confront us.

One obstacle to the people exercising democratic control is the existing system of liberal democracy. Having the right to vote every five years for one party or another to govern us is not democracy and gives us no real control over the decisions that affect our lives. The institutions of governance themselves prevent the people from exercising any decision-making power; in fact they remove decision-making from the people and place it with the elite, the bureaucracies, and the rich.

In regard to partition the Forum declares: “As a response to political upheaval and revolution in Ireland in the early twentieth century, partition provided a solution for and within imperialism. It divided the democratic forces and the working class; it was a compromise that unionism and its Tory supporters could accept; it provided a state in the 26 Counties in which nationalist capital and big business could advance their class interests; it provided a means of ending the Revolution without sparking social transformation; and it secured both parts of a divided Ireland for imperialism.”

Partition can only be addressed by confronting its role in denying democracy in both parts of Ireland, which produced the “carnival of reaction” that Connolly foresaw.

North and South, we are denied real democracy, sovereignty, and independence. All the institutions of governance—the EU and the euro zone, the British Parliament, the Stormont Executive, and the Dáil in Leinster House—serve to remove democratic control from the people and to promote the interests of capitalism and imperialism.

A new Ireland—a sovereign and independent Ireland—will be brought into being only by the working class, through the struggle of the working class. The elements that have abandoned national sovereignty and national democracy have no interest in these essential democratic tools. They are wedded to the interests of imperialism, whether that of the European Union, Britain, or the United States.

The working class has nothing to lose in this necessary struggle except the chains that bind us and shackle us to a failing economic system. ★

raised if the rate had been increased to 13½ per cent for 2018, and that a total of €2.6 billion had been lost to the exchequer since its introduction.

This is an industry that is making a profit ranging from €23,000 per hotel room in Dublin to €11,000 in the west of Ireland. These losses to the exchequer exclude all the money invested by the state in tourism and in advertising Ireland abroad—all done to boost the tourism industry and its private profits.

What the state should be doing is investing this money in state-owned hotels, restaurants and other facilities so that 100 per cent of the profits, and not just a small proportion, would go to the exchequer rather than into private hands. These profits would be reinvested in more hotels and a state tourist industry to further boost the state’s income, rather than subsidising privately owned companies.

It’s the very same situation as in housing, where the state subsidises landlords, builders and ultimately private profits instead of building public housing for the citizens to live in.

Unions, instead of scratching the surface by demanding higher VAT for hotels, must push much further by calling for the public ownership of industry for the benefit of society. There is little point in having motions on privatisation passed at union conferences unless these policies are actively pursued afterwards.

In recent years the only thing the state took into public ownership was private banking debt. At the same time waiting-lists for hospitals and housing exploded, because of “austerity” cuts. Rents have gone through the roof, while nurses are on poverty wages. The privateers get all the gains as the citizens are forced into the precariousness of private rented accommodation.

Bus Éireann, which is threatened with the loss of a further 10 per cent of routes as the state attempts to privatise public transport, is told that profitable commercial routes, such as Expressway, cannot be used to subsidise the public transport service. This is the other end of the neo-liberal project, as the state withdraws from the provision of public services, choosing to surrender these income streams to private owners.

Who in Ireland will complain if we subsidise health, education and housing from profits that at present are taken by the capitalist class, to the detriment of the citizens? We must attack capitalism itself for more radical and profound change that will transform society for the common good.

We have paid dearly at the hands of Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil. So, as the centenary of the first Dáil approaches, it’s time we got off our knees in a united front of unions, communities, republicans and socialists and fought for system change, to rid Ireland once and for all of the gombeenmen who seized power after the Rising. ★

The body politic

▲ 'Worker, fight for a clean dining-room for healthy food" (1931)

Laura Duggan

THE NEW YEAR And the annual (temporary) surge in gym membership, attendance at diet groups and body-shaming begins anew.

In the coming days and weeks women (and, increasingly, men) will be cajoled or bullied by television programmes, magazine covers, newspaper articles and advertisers to lose a dress or trouser size, trim their waist of the Christmas fat, and begin working towards a "new and better you"—all this building to a deafening climax in the summer months as these same people are placed under orders to get "beach-body ready."

More recently, this shaming has taken the lead in a pseudo-health outlook and articles dripping with faux-concern about getting people to eat better and exercise more; the aim of a more trimmed figure has remained the same, but it's a clever way of reinforcing old stereotypes regarding the moral fibre of overweight people: they must be gluttonous and lazy and entirely responsible personally for their own failings.

This shaming has a strong classist element. Research published in 2017 by the *International Journal of Public Health* shows that it is the working class in developed countries who are at the highest risk of both malnutrition and obesity. The Central Statistics Office confirms the pattern here, with Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown one of the healthiest parts of the country and the city of Dublin the unhealthiest.

More and more people in Ireland are now living in a "food desert"—an area where poverty, poor transport and the pushing out of the once ubiquitous local greengrocer, butcher and baker mean that access to affordable fresh and nutritious food, such as vegetables, can be an impossibility. These are often deprived areas, which are also "food swamps," dominated by cheap fast-food outlets.

Not surprisingly, there is a strong overlap between food deserts, food swamps, and obesity rates. Research published in 2017 in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* showed that food swamps were more prevalent in working-class areas, and a greater predictor of obesity than food deserts. This easy access to unhealthy food, along with the ever-increasing demands placed on workers' time, makes the €1 burger a more sensible option than an expensive and time-consuming trip to the nearest supermarket, followed by cooking, for a healthier alternative.

The increasing financial pressure of ever-increasing rents or mortgage repayments means that the weekly grocery budget can be one of the first

Universal basic income and the end

Sebastian Müller

IN MUCH Of the Western world the period immediately following the Second World War saw major changes in the nature of capitalist economic management and planning.

In response to the threats of renewed economic depression and of socialism (from both within and without), several of the major capitalist states expanded the role of the state in their national economies. From interventionist fiscal and monetary policy to ensure full employment to outright nationalisations, the remit of governments to determine the broad parameters of the national economy expanded significantly.

These reforms differed by time and place and were heavily constrained by both the limitations of bourgeois liberal democracy and the necessities of capital accumulation. Despite this they represented the high-water mark of popular democratic control over capitalist economies.

Even as the benefits remained confined to a select group in the imperial core (white heteronormative men), the period and its general tendencies have become known to some as the era of "democratic capitalism."

These modest concessions of capitalism to democratic control have been under attack since their introduction. The capitalist class has not only attempted to roll back the gains of the working class but has also sought to remove economic decisions from the purview of government altogether.

This has been achieved through various means, particularly since the mid-1970s. The privatisation of state companies, the destruction of trade unions, the "political independence" of central banks and the use of supranational organisations and treaties (such as the EU, WTO, and NAFTA) have all been used to insulate economic decision-making from any possible democratic interference, even if modulated through bourgeois political institutions.

Since the events of the 1990s these

‘Anywhere that western norms are introduced and capitalism tightens its grips is a place where not only are workers exploited but even the food marketed and pushed will make them ill.’

things to suffer. Calorie-heavy and dense carbohydrates keep a family fuller longer, last longer, and are easier to store than healthier produce, such as vegetables, which have limited shelf life, even with refrigeration.

Convenience food can also be one of the pleasures left to workers and their children when they are barely making the rent and bills. Let them have a takeaway if they can’t have new shoes or a warm house.

Obesity, at its most scaremongered, is reported to lead to an increased risk of heart disease, cancer and diabetes if a clinically obese person has an existing condition such as high blood pressure, blood sugar, or cholesterol. Anorexia and bulimia, which are also on the rise globally (by 7 per cent each year since the 1990s), are recognised as having the highest fatality rate of any psychiatric disorder, and are considered a life-threatening diagnosis.

The annual medical costs of malnutrition in Ireland are estimated at more than €1.4 billion—more than the estimated costs of obesity; and in both these cases there are few news services highlighting either fact. That is not to say that obesity isn’t a public health issue but that the concern displayed is only because of how it is useful in the pursuit of profit. Obesity is the bigger cash cow.

Obesity’s most recommended treatment is shown to actually worsen the problem. A study published in the *International Journal of Obesity* in 2012 assessed dieting habits in more than two thousand sets of twins. It found that the twin who dieted was two to three times more likely to become overweight than their non-dieting sibling. This is the result of diets tricking the body in a variety of ways, including inducing a starvation response to cull fat.

These have a lasting impact on the metabolism of the body and become harder to correct the more often they are induced. Diet culture is actually contributing to the obesity epidemic it purports to aid in halting.

Dieting is a cynical, multi-million industry, and there are thousands of options to choose from. It sells almost everything that sex is supposed to do, each alternative promising to get the weight off, for a while anyway. But not even a public body like the HSE, in its National Obesity Action Plan, offers a solution to the social factors that cause obesity. SlimFast sums it up best, its slogan “Works for me!” delivered with a backward glancing shrug implying that it’s not their fault and they don’t care if it doesn’t.

Capitalism and imperialism are at the root of the cause, the spread and the ineffective treatment of obesity. Once a rich man’s disease, obesity is now rampant in the developed and developing world. Anywhere that western norms are introduced and capitalism tightens its grips is a place where not only are workers exploited but even the food marketed and pushed will make them ill.

Compared with public health campaigns, such as those for giving up smoking, obesity is treated as an individual weakness or illness. The banning of advertising certain foods to children, as well as the obligation on food companies to make the nutritional content of food readily available, is a start; but the only real way to combat obesity as a genuine public health issue is not to use shame or to rely on a sugar tax but to ask why are working-class people denied access to fresh, healthy food, why is cooking a luxury for those few who are time-rich or financially rich (or both), and where are the school or community cooking courses and community gardens in the areas hardest hit by obesity.

A study published in the *British Medical Journal* in 2017 shows that socio-economic disadvantage is linked to obesity over generations, which means the solutions have to be intergenerational as well.

Henry Kissinger wasn’t wrong when he said, “If you control the food supply, you control the people.” We just need to take it back. ★

of ‘democratic capitalism’

trends have only accelerated. The popular control of economic policies has further declined, even if the state reserves economic potency to rescue the capitalist class from itself. The era of “democratic capitalism” has long since had its heyday, but its vestiges remain under attack.

In recent years the promise of a “universal basic income” (UBI) has emerged as one of the more subtle and potent threats to the remnants of democratic control and class power. This is a relatively straightforward concept, whereby the government would pay each of its citizens a guaranteed income, which would not be means-tested and would be in addition to any income they earned otherwise.

This seductively simple concept has won converts from all parts of the political spectrum, and it has variously been claimed that UBI would end poverty, simplify welfare systems, spur a golden age of culture . . . the list goes on.

UBI has also found significant supporters from within the social-democratic camp, who believe that such a policy would usher in a more inclusive “democratic capitalism.” Not only is this idea misguided, it also avoids any analysis of the likely effect of UBI on the few remaining aspects of democratic economic control in our societies.

The introduction of a universal basic income would immediately have two serious deleterious effects on the capacity of the state to influence the markets.

Firstly, by providing citizens with a set amount of income to meet their basic needs, capitalist governments would be able to justify selling off state companies or privatising the provision of services, for example public health services.

The rationale for state provision in these areas would be undercut by two interrelated arguments: (1) UBI would allow the individual to simply purchase the equivalent service on the private market, and (2) the cost of providing UBI would reduce the funds available for other schemes.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 7

Britain's divided ruling class

Tommy McKearney

THE BRITISH ruling class is divided over the Brexit issue. That much is clear. Not so obvious, though, is the underlying cause of this split.

Among the jingoistic fringe there is a hankering after the glory days of empire. Reared to believe that the sun was never supposed to set on Britannia, they have difficulties in coming to terms with former colonies, such as China, acquiring global status.

Nevertheless there is more to the internal class feuding than nostalgia for an era that all but the deluded few know will never return. Some, of course, wish to remain in the EU, but a different and more threatening cohort view Brexit as an opportunity to restore Britain to a position of prominence in the US-led imperialist world order.

In time the reality will become clearer, but for now this can be understood as a struggle between contending elements within Britain's capitalist elite. This phenomenon, however, is not confined to Britain but is something that affects capitalism all round the globe. To a large extent, the conflict has come to a head as a result of the economic crash of 2008, which was essentially a crisis in the financial sector of capital.

The neo-liberal policies advocated by Hayek and Friedman and launched on a global scale during the Reagan and Thatcher era removed most of the restrictions forced upon capital in the aftermath of the Great Depression and the Second World War. Free from all restraint, and encouraged by a deliberately cultivated narrative that greed is good, capital sought and found quick and easy profit in the financial services sector.

In the absence of strict state supervision, it was inevitable that rules were bent and prudence abandoned as new and risky financial instruments were created. In time this led to the sub-prime collapse in the United States, precipitating the global financial crash in which Lehman Brothers in America and Northern Rock in Britain fell into bankruptcy.

Of more fundamental significance was the fact that while much of capital focused on the services sector in general and the financial sector in particular, manufacturing was allowed to decline in many advanced industrialised countries. For a time the neo-liberal ideology of "small government" facilitated outsourcing and offshoring to cheaper centres of production.

At first the super-rich welcomed the process. They were not only garnering gigantic profits but were simultaneously witnessing the weakening of locally based organised labour. In time, though, a section of the ruling class in the United States and Britain began to realise that, over time, finance always follows production and resources, whether human or mineral. Moreover, they understood that, ultimately, power is dependent on control of a strong industrial and manufacturing base, with guaranteed access to raw materials.

In the long run, intellectual property rights can be acquired or duplicated, but the skill base necessary for the large-scale production of high-tech equipment requires a large and highly trained work force.

This realisation has caused powerful elements within the American ruling class to advocate and implement the country's current foreign trade policy. Whether Donald Trump is the mastermind of this strategy or is only a catspaw for others is immaterial, as he uses his office and the power of the state in an attempt to revitalise and restore manufacturing in the United States. The objective may appear to be dictated by populism, but it has the

‘What we can say is that there is not a simple binary choice between Tory Britain and the EU.’

parallel logic of maintaining and reinforcing America’s global economic superiority and capacity, vital elements on which military capacity is built.

Paranoia about the rise of China is therefore about more than anger at it for encouraging unfair trading policies. Their real fear is that China is developing an economy capable of competing with and eventually outperforming the United States and its allies.

It is no coincidence, for example, that Meng Wanzhou, the Chinese woman detained by the Canadian authorities at the behest of the United States, is Huawei’s chief finance officer. Meng’s company is the largest and most powerful high-tech business in China and is fast outpacing all others in the United States and Europe in the telecommunications arena.

Such a situation would pose a direct challenge to America’s expressed determination to remain as the pre-eminent world superpower, with the ability to enforce “full-spectrum dominance.” In a world in which sophisticated technology is now the dominant mode of production, the control of this is considered imperative by imperialism. Losing this contest would be to concede advantage to others; and imperialism never gives ground willingly to a potential rival, even at the risk of military conflict.

In ways there are uncomfortable echoes now with the decades before the First World War, when Germany’s economy began to rival, and in some industries to outgrow, that of Britain.[1]

Nor is the threat of war something that is taken lightly or overlooked by the superpowers. A recent article in the *Financial Times* referred to the risks arising from the emergence of an alternative centre of power as the “Thucydides trap.”[2] In this article the writer mentions that five years ago the president of China, Xi Jinping, had identified this danger. He used the same historical analogy when urging a visiting delegation to tell the world that everybody had to work to avoid such a catastrophic scenario.

This is the dangerous global backdrop against which several of the leading Brexiteers in Britain are operating. Though the immediate fault line dividing the ruling class is between those benefiting from financial services and the wider manufacturing sector, this is not the whole picture. The dispute is not merely about profit and loss in the short to medium term. There are those who are determined to maintain the existing world order and at the same time to arrest Britain’s declining influence within it.

To do so they are intent on establishing a high-tech manufacturing base, and are willing to have this happen at the expense of the City of London. If Brexit occurs according to their design and under Conservative Party governance, Britain will remain a largely low-wage country but with a diminishing social wage and a constantly receding welfare safety net—in other words, not greatly different from Britain within the EU.

Clearly a left-leaning Corbyn-led government would create a very different set of circumstances and conditions; but powerful forces, both within and without the Labour Party, are working to prevent such an outcome.

Where Ireland may fall in this scenario is difficult to tell. It is important, nevertheless, to attempt to understand the dynamics underlying this situation. What we can say is that there is not a simple binary choice between Tory Britain and the EU. Both are wedded to the enforcement of neo-liberal economic policies, and both are committed to aggressive military expansionism. This will not change whether we have a “hard” or “soft” border within Ireland.

What is needed is a different and humane socialist world order. Our contribution, as a small country, to this sought-after development must be to create a sovereign workers’ republic—a republic free from British, EU and US imperialism and supportive of progressive humanity wherever it struggles for the good of all. ★

1 See Zoltan Zigedy, “A world in turmoil,” *Morning Star*, 27 November 2018.
2 This was based on an observation by the Ancient Greek historian Thucydides that the rise of Athens led to conflict with the established power that was Sparta. Gideon Rachman, “Thucydides’ trap,” *Financial Times*, 19 December 2018.

Universal basic income

By combining these points with the mantra of “choice” in the market-place, the ruling class would be able to complete the wholesale dismantling of state influence on the economy.

Secondly, the splitting of state funds in such a manner would see the people interacting with the market as an atomised set of individuals rather than as a collective. Such an atomising would in effect prevent states from exercising their economic power and planning on a macro-economic scale.

As a simple example, while the state can use its buying power to lower the price of medicines, or to shift the health-care industry to concentrate on preventive medicine, such a co-ordinated course of action would be practically impossible for millions of unrelated individuals.

By allowing the state to further withdraw from controlling or influencing the market, and by dissipating its economic power among atomised individuals, UBI would seriously corrode the ability of citizens to exert democratic control over their economic destinies. Far from restoring the glory days of “democratic capitalism,” as claimed by many on the social-democratic left, a universal basic income would herald the final death-blow to the gains of the post-war era and leave us with a mere stipend, to be raised or lowered by the ruling class at their whim.

It is imperative that we on the left begin to seriously examine the probable consequences of any proposed cure-all policy on the class structure of our societies. In the case of UBI, the diminution of democratic influence over national economies and the atomising of citizens’ interaction with the market are only two of the possible negative ramifications for working-class power.

Rather than putting our faith in simplistic technical fixes to the capitalist economy, we must build our understanding of the capitalist system so as to use that understanding to build class power and bring this system to an end.

Sixty years later, Cuba is still fighting

This year is the sixtieth anniversary of the victory of the Cuban Revolution in 1959. Fidel Castro declared at the time: "Tyranny has been overthrown. The joy is immense. And yet, much remains to be done."

DESPITE THE decades-long blockade imposed on Cuba by the United States, and its long isolation by reactionary and fascist governments in Latin America, Cuba has developed, and the people's living standards have changed beyond recognition, achieving social advances that Irish workers can only dream of.

The United States continues to impose its illegal blockade, extending across the world, affecting countries and companies that trade in any way with Cuba. This has resulted in bank accounts being frozen, and companies being fined or prevented from doing business with the United States.

It is estimated that this illegal blockade has cost Cuba in the region of $753 billion. It has also prevented the country importing medical supplies and equipment, new technology, and even parts for musical instruments. The list is endless.

Why does the United States, with a population of nearly 330 million people—a country bulging with nuclear weapons, with millions of soldiers under arms, the largest military budget by far of any country in the world, and military bases in dozens of countries—fear a small country like Cuba, with a population of about 11½ million people, smaller than that of the London metropolitan area?

This small country has not invaded or threatened any of its neighbours, has no military bases in any other country, has no naval capacity to engage in gunboat diplomacy, and has no nuclear weapons.

Cuba is not perfect, and has never claimed to be. It is a country struggling to overcome centuries of colonial plunder and imperialist domination. It is laying the basis for sustainable future economic security for its people.

So what is it that capitalist governments feel so threatened by? Here are some answers.

- Cuba pioneered sexual and reproductive rights, legalising abortion in 1965. Both abortion and contraceptives are free.
- Cuban parents receive generous maternity and parental leave.
- Both parents are entitled to forty weeks' leave on 60 per cent of pay. Mothers receive full wages for four-and-a-half months.
- Cuba has the lowest infant mortality rate of any country in Latin America and of other poor countries around the world.
- Women make up the majority of judges, lawyers, scientists, technical workers, public health workers, and other professionals.
- 53 per cent of deputies in the Cuban National Assembly are women, the second-highest proportion in the world.
- Nine of the fifteen provincial assemblies are headed by women.
- 64 per cent of university places are occupied by women.
- Cuban women can expect to live on average to over eighty—a higher figure than the United States.
- A pregnant woman will receive a minimum of thirteen antenatal check-ups during her pregnancy. Those with high-risk pregnancies or with social problems receive extensive home care.

The Cuban Women's Federation must

‘Working people in Cuba have economic and political power in their own hands.’

be consulted on legislation and how it will affect women. Under the law, all government departments have a responsibility to ensure that their policies aid the advancement of women and do not undermine their position. They must also give an annual account of what they have done or are doing to achieve this.

The position of women in Cuba has changed beyond recognition, though more has to be done to finally create true equality between women and men and to end cultural machismo.

Cuba is a world leader in public health, far ahead of many of the countries that constantly berate Cuba for its supposed human-rights record. Medical care is in fact enshrined in the Cuban constitution—a far cry from the shambles of a health system that Irish workers have to endure.

- The doctor-patient ratio in Cuba is one doctor per 125 patients, much higher than the United States and Britain, and far ahead of Ireland.
- Family doctors and nurses work from a small local office, called a “consultario,” providing basic services.
- More serious areas, such as paediatrics, obstetrics, gynaecology, and dentistry, are dealt with at the local polyclinic, which serves between fourteen and thirty consultarios.
- All Cuban families receive a minimum of one home visit per year from their family doctor, who carries out routine tests such as blood pressure, heart, life-style etc. and gives advice on improvements that might be made.
- Families with high risk, such as existing health problems, smokers, and those with other addiction problems, are seen much more frequently.
- Patients wait on average one week to see a specialist.
- The primary care system ensures fast communication between family doctor, specialist, and patient. This community-based primary care is central to the success of the Cuban medical system.
- Before the Revolution, Cuba had only three medical colleges, which were exclusively for the rich; today there are twenty-three. Here they train not only Cubans but thousands of overseas medical students, free of charge.

This is a far cry from ward closures, patients lying on trolleys in hospital corridors, and long waiting-lists for seeing a consultant, a two-tier health system where, if you have money or private insurance, you jump the queue, leaving working people and the poor waiting for months.

In the field of education Cuba has an outstanding record. After the victory of the Revolution thousands of volunteers took part in a literacy campaign in working-class districts and in the countryside, teaching people to read and write. Today education is free at all levels.

- Parents are involved at all levels and are engaged and consulted on their child’s education.
- At the primary level, each school has a parent-teacher committee, to encourage the full participation of parents in their child’s schooling.
- Support is given to parents; they can even attend classes on pedagogy and psychology to help them understand their role in their children’s education.
- There are free pre-school centres for all under-fives. After-school clubs for all children are available, also free.
- There are special schemes for those parents who want to stay at home with their children.
- The Cuban education budget is 13 per cent of GDP, as against 5½ per cent for the United States and Britain.

The social advances made by the Cuban people over the last sixty years are impressive; and they do pose a grave threat to this decaying system of capitalism imposed upon us.

These impressive social advances are because of the very fact that the working class of Cuba have built a state, have state power. All wealth is produced by labour, by working people; and in Cuba they decide how that wealth is distributed, what are the social, economic and cultural priorities.

Contrast this with how our society is run, and who it is run for. It is run by the rich for the rich. All economic, social and political decisions in Ireland are made to protect those with money. No decision will ever be taken that might threaten that wealth and power.

Cuban democracy is different from ours. We are taught in school, and our curriculum informs us, that we live in a democracy—the only possible form of democracy—because we have multiple parties and we can elect the Government or replace the Government next time round.

In our lifetime (i.e. over a period of forty years) we might have the opportunity to vote perhaps ten to twenty times. But after we have cast our vote we have no means of changing or even influencing Government policy, other than by mobilising and demonstrating on the street.

Even then our victories hold for as long as we remain vigilant and organised. Nothing is ever guaranteed. The ruling elite and its governments will give us all the rights they think we need, but we will never get economic power.

We have multiple parties in the Dáil, but we have only one economic manifesto, that is, to protect the interests of the rich. In our place of work, where we spend most of our lives, we have no say or control; many of us are even denied the right to be represented by a trade union.

Cuban democracy is different. At present the Cuban people are discussing a new constitution, to be voted on in February this year. So far, more than 135,000 meetings have taken place in every community, work-place, school, and college. Amendments have been proposed, voted on, and submitted.

Every local, regional and national assembly, and all elected officials, are subject to recall, and are obliged to report on their activities to local meetings.

Working people in Cuba have economic and political power in their own hands. They have a state to ensure the equitable distribution of resources, and to build an infrastructure that the people need, not what big business wants or requires above that of the people. This is why they fear Cuba.

Cuba is a beacon of hope that there is an alternative to this decaying system called capitalism. It has shown real solidarity with oppressed peoples in their struggles for freedom and justice. The Cuban people have been selfless in sharing their own limited resources; they have shown real working-class solidarity and true friendship to many nations and peoples, and have asked nothing in return.

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The world view of working people is and should be very different from that of the ruling elite. The elite take, steal, plunder, create havoc, bomb, kill and maim to get their hands on other people's natural resources. They sow division and hatred, leaving poverty, destitution and hopelessness in their wake.

The US regime has branded Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua as threats to its national security and declared that they must be quarantined, marginalised, and isolated, preparing the ground for military intervention by domestic reactionaries, aided by the US military machine, to secure regime change and the restoration of the rule of the rich and powerful.

Cuba, on the other hand, has shown a different way forward, one of mutual support, sharing knowledge and resources, protecting nature, building the material base for future equality.

Cuba has travelled a long and arduous journey over the last sixty years. It has achieved a lot, yet solving one problem opens up new problems to be overcome, new challenges to be undertaken, new advances to be made, despite the brutal US blockade.

The Cuban Revolution shows the superiority of socialism over capitalism. It points the way forward for achieving national sovereignty and independence. You simply cannot separate social emancipation from the achievement of national freedom: they are inseparable.

As Raúl Castro, first secretary of the Communist Party of Cuba, put it so well on the occasion of the sixtieth anniversary, "we feel happy and confident when we see with our own eyes that the new generations continue building socialism, the only guarantee of national independence and sovereignty.

"The greatest lesson that revolutionaries and progressive movements can draw from the situation that has been forged is that of never forgetting unity with the people and never ceasing to support the most dispossessed." ★

Cuban doctors unable to carry out their mission in Brazil

THE MINISTRY of Public Health of the Republic of Cuba, committed to the solidarity and humanistic principles that have guided Cuba's medical co-operation for fifty-five years, has been participating in the programme More Doctors for Brazil since its inception in August 2013. This initiative, launched by Dilma Rousseff, who was at that moment president of the Federal Republic of Brazil, pursued the double purpose of guaranteeing medical assistance to the majority of the Brazilian people, following the principle of universal health coverage promoted by the World Health Organisation.

The programme had planned the inclusion of Brazilian and foreign doctors who would go to work in poor and remote areas of that country.

Cuba's participation in this programme was arranged through the Pan-American Health Organisation, with one distinctive feature, for it was intended to fill the vacancies left by doctors from Brazil and other foreign countries.

During these five years of work about 20,000 Cuban co-operation workers have assisted 113 million patients in more than 3,600 municipalities. They managed to provide health coverage for up to 60 million Brazilians at a time when they accounted for 80 per cent of all the doctors who were taking part in the programme. More than 700 municipalities were able to count on a doctor for the first time ever.

The work of Cuban doctors in areas of extreme poverty, in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, São Salvador da Bahia and the thirty-four special indigenous districts, particularly in Amazônia, was largely recognised by the federal, state and municipal governments of that country and its population, 95 per cent of which expressed their acceptance, according to a survey carried out by the Federal University of Minas Gerais at the request of the Ministry of Health of Brazil.

On 27 September 2016 the Ministry of Public Health, in an official statement issued on a day close to the expiry date of the agreement and amidst the events associated with the legislative and judicial coup d'état against President Dilma Rousseff, announced that Cuba

Declaration of the Ministry of Public Health of Cuba (Edited)

"would continue to honour its agreement with the Pan-American Health Organisation for the implementation of the programme More Doctors, provided that the guarantees offered by local authorities were maintained," something that has been so far respected.

Jair Bolsonaro, president of Brazil, who has made direct, contemptuous and threatening comments against the presence of our doctors, has declared and reiterated that he will modify the terms and conditions of the programme, in complete disregard of the Pan-American Health Organisation and the agreement reached by that organisation with Cuba, since he has questioned the qualification of our doctors and has conditioned their permanence in the programme to a process of validation of their titles and established that contracts will only be signed on an individual basis.

The announced modifications impose conditions that are unacceptable and fail to ensure the guarantees that had been previously agreed upon since the beginning of the programme, which were ratified in 2016 with the renegotiation of the Terms of Cooperation between the Pan-American Health Organisation and the Ministry of Health of Brazil and the Cooperation Agreement between the Pan-American Health Organisation and the Ministry of Public Health of Cuba. These unacceptable conditions make it impossible to maintain the presence of Cuban professionals in the programme.

Consequently, in the light of this unfortunate reality, the Ministry of Public Health of Cuba has decided to discontinue its participation in the programme More Doctors and has so informed the director of the Pan-American Health Organisation and the political leaders of Brazil who founded and defended this initiative.

The decision to call into question the dignity, professionalism and altruism of Cuban co-operation workers, who, with the support of their families, are at present offering their services in sixty-seven countries, is unacceptable. During the last fifty-five years a total of 600,000 internationalist missions have been accomplished in 164 countries, with the participation of 400,000 health workers, who, in quite a few cases, have fulfilled this honourable task more than once. Their feats in the struggle against the Ebola virus in Africa, against blindness in Latin America and the Caribbean and against cholera in Haïti, as well as the participation of twenty-six brigades of the Henry Reeve International Contingent of Doctors Specialised in Disaster Situations and Great Epidemics in Pakistan, Indonesia, Mexico, Ecuador, Peru, Chile and Venezuela, among other countries, are worthy of praise.

In the overwhelming majority of the missions that have been accomplished, all expenses have been covered by the Cuban government. Likewise, 35,613 health professionals from 138 countries have been trained in Cuba, at absolutely no cost, as an expression of our solidarity and internationalist vocation.

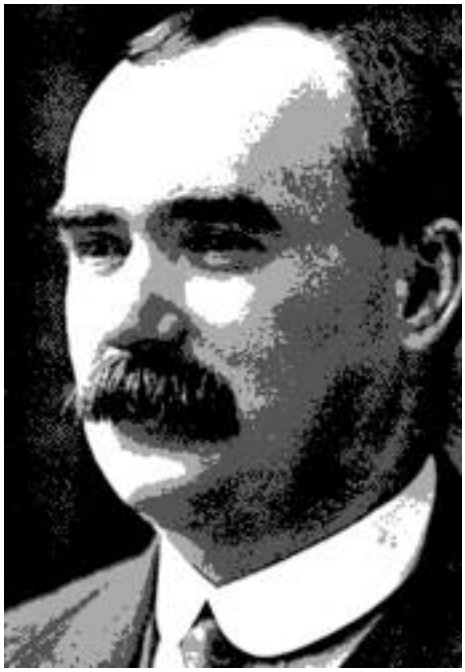
All Cuban co-operation workers have preserved their posts and their full salary in Cuba, together with all due labour and social benefits, just like the rest of the workers of the National Health System.

The experience of the programme More Doctors for Brazil and Cuba's participation in it shows that it is indeed possible to structure a South-South Cooperation Programme under the auspices of the Pan-American Health Organisation. In order to promote the achievement of its goals in our region the United Nations Development Programme and the World Health Organisation have described it as the main example of good practices in triangular co-operation and the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals.

The peoples of Our America and from all over the world know that they will always be able to count on the solidarity and humanistic vocation of our professionals.

The Brazilian people, who turned the programme More Doctors into a social achievement and from the very beginning have trusted Cuban doctors, recognised their virtues, and appreciated the respect, sensitivity and professionalism with which they have assisted them, will understand who are to be held responsible for our doctors not being able to continue offering their fraternal contribution in that country. ★

ABOVE LEFT: Havana, November 23 Cuban doctors return from Brazil. (Prensa Latina)



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Tech and game workers are organising

Nicola Lawlor

THE PAST year or two have seen a number of big developments in the working life of technology and game workers. It seems now that there is a global push from these workers to be organised collectively and to have their voice heard on such things as contract insecurity, sexual harassment, and the ethics of the industry they work in.

Previously within Marxist circles there was some debate about whether or not these types of workers should be considered workers at all. The debate revolved around the difference between physical and mental labour, and what is classified as productive or non-productive labour. The debate has somewhat settled down to a consensus that jobs are a combination of physical and mental labour, and also that the capitalist accumulation regime has changed so significantly that what might have been considered unproductive capital is now a core part of profit-creation, and therefore those creating that profit— workers— should be considered part of the global working class.

Of course the debate about levels of class-consciousness continues, but low levels of class-consciousness are no longer the preserve of white-collar workers. Class-consciousness ebbs and flows with struggle and conditions, and so there cannot be an objective scientific approach to defining class. What is interesting today is that tech and game workers are describing themselves as workers, and this is indicative of the conditions they work in and the issues they are facing.

The focus of much discussion about technology is often merely the number of jobs that will be lost. "The robots are taking our jobs" is an often-heard description. But this is techno-determinist and sees technology as an independent and inevitable force. It misses the fact that technology is designed, shaped and owned by humans and is subject to human agency, influence, and ultimately questions of ownership, regulation, and class struggle.

While technology has a certain direction under capitalism, that is because of the ownership and accumulation regime of capital, not because of some intrinsic dynamic of the piece of hardware or software itself. This view is summed up well by Boreham et al. in their book *New Technology @ Work* (2008):

> Technology itself has no independent causal powers but it can make a significant difference to our working and other lives when it is invested with specific purposes by human agents (managers, policy makers) and is embedded in particular social relationships and institutions. An important consideration that underlies the debate about new technology at work is that decisions that influence the implementation of new technology in various national settings are part of a continuing process of change which will be very likely to constrain future choices and to set a trajectory for the work-place of the future.*

A number of shocking incidents this year capture this issue of human control, purpose and influence over technology.

In March 2018 the first pedestrian was killed by a driverless Uber car. This technology is being trialled in the typical Silicon Valley mentality of the "move fast and break things" culture of capitalist innovation. In this example, however, the tragic "break things" element was the death of a pedestrian.

There was also the scandal of the algorithm used by the US agency Immigration and Customs Enforcement, which gave 100 per cent "detain" answers to the data entered, resulting in the unjust detention of immigrants. This was an algorithm created for political purposes but designed to give an air of objectivity and science: "Computer says No"—only all the time!

In July last year internal company documents were released that showed that products supplied by IBM Watson Health had given multiple incorrect diagnoses and incorrect treatment recommendations for hypothetical cancer patients. IBM had already begun advertising the software in an attempt to get ahead of competitors, but the report went so far as quoting a doctor as saying, "This product is a piece of shit."

In October 2018 the *New York Times* published an article exposing the link between Facebook's failure to audit and authenticate accounts and ethnic cleansing in Burma. Senior military officials set up fake Facebook accounts, posing as ordinary individuals, and incited hate speech, ethnic cleansing and murder against minority populations.

And in July 2018 it was reported that Google was stepping away from a contract with the US military to build an AI drone software program for the

‘Globally, game workers are also becoming active and are more explicitly organising in trade unions, though not always conventionally.’

military, following a number of resignations from the company on ethical grounds and also significant internal staff mobilisation against the contract, including petitions signed by thousands.

These are just a number of examples of how humans and the political-economic-military power structures of the world shape and determine technology, and a far more complex way than simply saying it’s inevitable and it’s going to take our jobs.

This is also the context in which tech and game workers are organising globally into unions and other movements.

The Google example is a good place to begin. When it became generally known to Google employees that the company was profiting from building technology that would help the US military to kill people, many Google employees began rallying against it. Chat groups were set up, petitions were signed and submitted, and a number of senior employees resigned. This collectively organised pressure encouraged the company to move away from the contracts.

Google employees didn’t stop there. They were annoyed at how the company was handling allegations of sexual harassment and discrimination; and so they went about organising the #googlewalkout. They walked out in support of five demands aimed at tackling harassment and discrimination, including the right to representation in meetings.

The Google walkout burst a bubble that the company has carefully tried to create. It projects itself as a great place to work, with employees so happy that the idea of a trade union doesn’t arise. That myth is now shattered.

But what is most interesting about these collective actions by workers in Google is that it is (or certainly seems to be from the outside) self-organised. There is no union leading it. And at the moment it isn’t seeking to become, or to link up with, a union. It is more a collective of Google employees. However, following the walkout there was a significant shift in the language used on social media towards more use of “worker” over “employee” and also increasingly union-like language, such as “collective strength” and “stronger together,” which are more like traditional trade union rallying cries.

In Silicon Valley there has been the emergence of the Tech Workers’ Coalition, an organisation of workers concerned about conditions of employment and also the ethics and morality of the industry they work in. While not a union, it did bravely support trade unions organising cafeteria staff in a number of firms in Silicon Valley and so have certainly nailed their colours to the mast, in the eyes of their employers at least.

Globally, game workers are also becoming active and are more explicitly organising in trade unions, though not always conventionally. The international movement Game Workers Unite (www.gameworkersunite.org) encourages pro-union workers to establish branches and engage in local activity, with a significant amount of autonomy to link with other unions locally, or to register as a trade union in accordance with local laws; and the British branch did just that. Game Workers Unite is now a branch of the Independent Workers’ Union of Great Britain and is actively campaigning and organising workers into the union.

The Office Block, a podcast by the Financial Services Union here in Ireland, recently interviewed game workers on their efforts; it’s worth listening to.[2]

Workers’ struggle can take many forms, and always a combination of the deliberate and the accidental. And the best of these struggles evolve and develop, rarely remaining static. So too do the organisational forms that struggles take, both shaping and being shaped by struggle. Many of our existing union structures were shaped by the industrial class struggles of the early twentieth century.

For unions to retain their power and to be a crucial part of working-class mobilisation they must evolve, shape and be shaped by the struggle of workers today and its present-day forms. ★

1 Paul Boreham, Rachel Parker, Paul Thompson, Richard Hall, *New Technology @ Work*, London: Routledge, 2008.
2 https://soundcloud.com/theofficeblock/episode-5-can-tech-workers-unite-we-go-deep-into-the-digital-mines.

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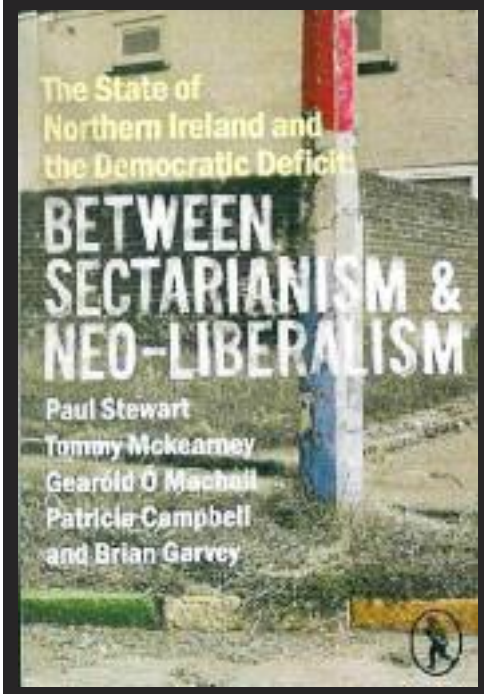

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For an anti-imperialist ecology

Graham Harrington

THE ANTHROPOCENE Is the term used to describe the geological period in which human activity has been the main determining factor in the Earth System. This influence has been overwhelmingly negative and has led the Earth into its sixth great extinction event.

While capitalism will portray this as the fault of human beings in general, the fact is that it is capitalism—specifically capitalism at its latest stage, imperialism—that deserves the blame. Whether it be the decision of the British ruling class in 1912 to switch from coal to oil in its battleships (partly as a response to the militancy of coalminers) or the increase in the consumption of luxury goods in the United States after its rise to global supremacy, state-monopoly capitalism has ensured that any increase in GDP has led to a decline in environmental standards, to say the least.

Since 1950 catastrophic damage has been done to the environment, and it is no coincidence that this period is also seen as the golden age of capitalism.

Despite the United States being the model of free-market "success," in reality its economy has still not recovered from its 1929 crash, and has only survived because of a military Keynesianism, which has merely kicked the can further down the road. The Marxist historian Art Preis wrote that "at no time since 1929 has American capitalism maintained even a semblance of economic stability and growth without huge military spending and debt." This spending was only intensified as a result of the Cold War and the threat posed by the socialist world.

The US military is now the world's largest polluter. It is the number 1 user of petroleum and the largest producer of greenhouse gases, and produces more hazardous waste than the five biggest American chemical companies combined. Nuclear testing and the use of depleted uranium, Agent Orange etc., while causing uncountable damage to human beings, also made a massive impact on the planet that humans live and work on. Indeed it has been estimated that a fifth

Boycott Eurovision!

Palestinians have called on members of the European Broadcasting Union to boycott the 2019 Eurovision Song Contest if it is hosted by Israel, regardless of where it is held.

ISRAEL IS expected to host the Eurovision Song Contest next May, following its win in the 2018 contest. Israel is shamelessly using Eurovision as part of its official Brand Israel strategy, which presents "Israel's prettier face" to whitewash and distract attention from its war crimes against Palestinians.

On 14 May 2018, days after Israel's win in the Eurovision Song Contest, the Israeli army killed sixty-two unarmed Palestinian protesters in Gaza, including six children, and injured hundreds more. The same evening the winning singer performed a celebratory concert in Tel Aviv, hosted by the mayor, where she said, "We have a reason to be happy." The Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, has called her "the best ambassador of Israel," underlining his far-right government's art-washing agenda.

By October of the same year almost a hundred Palestinians, including children, had been killed and thousands more injured, many by live ammunition. These protests were a part of the Great March of Return, that demanded that Palestinian refugees and their descendants be allowed to return to the land that was stolen from them.

There is widespread support by Irish people for the people of Palestine. There have been gestures of solidarity by many city and county councils, which chose to fly the Palestinian flag on the fiftieth anniversary of occupation. The trade union movement has called for a boycott of goods produced in illegal settlements, and each year on New Year's Eve a vigil is held in towns and cities to commemorate the anniversary of the Israeli attack on Gaza.

It is not hard to see the similarities with our own anti-colonial struggle; but more can and must be done.

This year we have a rare opportunity to push our display of solidarity into the international arena with a call to boycott the Eurovision Song Contest in Tel Aviv. This campaign already has widespread support. The Musicians' Union of Ireland has passed a motion in support of the cultural boycott of Israel, and Irish Equity,

‘Climate change is a political problem and can only be solved by political solutions.’

of all environmental degradation was caused by military activities alone.

The consequences of climate change, while overwhelmingly caused by a small number of countries, are imposed mostly on the poor and oppressed; 99 per cent of the victims of global weather disasters are in developing countries, with 75 per cent of these being women. The rich can afford to buy themselves out and insulate themselves from the disaster they have created. This will only lead to further conflict and migration from those countries to the regions where the wealth taken from their resources ends up.

The Irish state is not immune to this, given its geopolitical position. Moneypoint power station at Kilrush, Co. Clare, is one of the largest energy-producers in the country, run by the ESB. It is reliant on its coal from the Cerrejón open-pit mine in La Guajira, Colombia, where indigenous people and social leaders have been intimidated from pointing out the environmental and social consequences of the mine.

Climate change is a political problem and can only be solved by political solutions. We have been forced to fight it as individuals, from being told not to eat meat, to drive less, or some other individualist solution. Meanwhile the real culprits get away with it. This is merely the ruling class escaping their responsibility. The only solution lies in a change of political-economic system. As David Harvey has said, we are all neo-liberals now.

While eco-socialists and others have made well-meaning attempts to draw attention to climate change as a consequence of capitalism in the abstract, we need to go further. It is uneven development that allows this to happen unimpeded. It is a consequence of a system working as designed. We can only challenge environmental catastrophe at the national level.

China has tackled pollution by increasing the number of energy companies in state ownership. Last year the president, Xi Jinping, called for an “ecological civilisation” in his address to the national congress of the Chinese Communist Party. Socialist Cuba has pioneered advances in environmentally sustainable agriculture, with a tenth of Cuba’s landmass environmentally protected as part of a 100-year plan to protect the country from climate change.

These are just some examples of what a sovereign, independent and environmentally minded state can accomplish. If we fail, one consequence will be that trade unions will increasingly find that workers are not able to work because of increasing heat, a common complaint but one that is a dangerous health and safety issue; yet economic pressures mean that not all workers have the ability to refuse work.

As the left, in Ireland and abroad, continues to go from one defensive struggle to the next, for the sake of our planet and ourselves we need to take the initiative. This is a feminist issue, a trade union issue, and a peace issue, and it needs to be at the front of our thinking, not merely a box-ticking exercise. We can either save the planet or save imperialism.

“For it is because we are kept in the dark about the nature of human society—as opposed to nature in general—that we are now faced (so the scientists concerned assure me) by the complete destructibility of this planet that has barely been made fit to live in.”—Bertolt Brecht. ★

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the actors’ union, endorses the call for a boycott. Artists from other European countries and beyond support the appeal from Palestinian artists to boycott the event. Many have signed an open letter, including some previous performers in the contest and commentators.

The European Broadcasting Union made it clear at a forum hosted by RTE in 2018 that it was not in favour of a boycott, insisting that the song contest is a “cultural event” that should not be politicised. This statement was made only a year after Ukraine, with no ramifications, banned Russia from competing. The Eurovision Song Contest is not devoid of politics: the EBU simply wants to control which political stances get air time.

Israel has used pink-washing, feminist politics, the spectre of anti-Semitism and the tired declaration of being “the only democracy in the Middle East” to try to paper over its crimes against humanity.

Israel is an illegal occupation and is constantly building settlements in different parts of Palestine, with few or no consequences. It routinely uses detention to silence dissenting journalists. Palestinian children are arrested and imprisoned; there is widespread use of torture as well as overt discrimination on the grounds of religion and culture, and a denial of basic rights to millions of Palestinians.

The occupation affects every aspect of life for Palestinians: it dictates where they can live, where they can work or study, and controls their ability to travel and even who they can marry.

Conditions in the Gaza Strip, which has been under an almost complete air, sea and land blockade and bombardment since 2007, are even worse. Buildings that are reduced to rubble cannot be replaced, as building equipment and materials have restricted entry, as have many foodstuffs, medical equipment, medicines, and other everyday necessities, such as shoes. Exports have practically ceased, and the amount of goods allowed into Gaza is a quarter of the pre-blockade flow.

This has resulted in alarming rates of childhood stunting, caused by inadequate nutrition, and of preventable deaths, as well as limited fuel and cooking gas, less than four hours of electricity a day, more than 96 per cent of the water undrinkable, and an unemployment rate of 42 per cent. Israeli forces have admitted using a punitive blockade in order to weaken opposition.

How can an event like the Eurovision Song Contest, despite its slogan of “Dare to Dream,” not be deemed complicit with the subjugation of Palestine by allowing Israel to play host?

This year will be the fifty-second year of the occupation of Palestine, and is unlikely to be the last. Let us do more than just dare to dream of a free Palestine but work towards it and support it in whatever way we can. ★

See the open letter “Palestinian artists and broadcast journalists: Boycott Eurovision 2019!” at https://tinyurl.com/ya8l3ovx.

Religious fundamentalism in post-socialist Russia

Jenny Farrell

RUSSIAN CINEMA today explores capitalism against the backdrop of a past socialist experience. Open-minded visitors to former socialist states, and particularly to Russia, will come across this living memory and frequently an acknowledgement of the loss of humanist values since the defeat of socialism in Europe.

It is interesting too, in this context, that the much-favoured Western, seriously reductionist identification of socialism with Stalin is not the way it is remembered where it was once lived. Instead the recollection is more multi-faceted; and uppermost for many is a more people-oriented society, with work, homes, and a future. Many of those who were educated in this social system retain a general understanding of Marxism from their school or university days.

This is the context for contemporary Russian cinema and specifically for Kirill Serebrennikov's film *The Student* (2016), available now on DVD.

Based on Marius von Mayerburg's play *Märtyrer* (Martyr), it is the story of a teenage secondary school pupil, Venya, who causes havoc from his literal interpretation of the Bible. He has not been exposed to religion by his atheist single mother but by the school's religion teacher.

The film shows just how fundamentalist the Christian Bible can be read. Venya demands, and achieves, a change in the girls' swimwear for swimming classes. He correctly identifies the school's young biology teacher, Elena, as his natural enemy, whose death he will consider. She is the only force within the school who actively opposes this new-found ideology.

Elena uses scientific arguments against a growing Christian fundamentalist force within the school. The priest and the religion teacher, on the other hand, actively encourage Venya. Instead of sharing the biology teacher's scientific standpoint, the principal suggests to her, following a protest by Venya against Darwin's theory of evolution: "Why don't you discuss this with the holy father? . . . To teach the children both creation theories . . . You should really talk to the father to find a compromise."

This scene, which develops hilariously, shows where such irrational ideological "pluralism" can lead. Past knowledge is surrendered because the arguments have been lost, or are suppressed.

When Venya begins sermonising in the history class the teacher comments: "People used to believe in something, but everything changed, they needed money, and they forgot about communism. Now there is something to believe in again."

At least half of Venya's lines are direct quotations from the Bible, and chapter and verse are always blended on the screen. Some of these quotations go like this: "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have come to bring the sword, to set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother. As for my enemies who didn't want me to rule over them, slaughter them in my presence. (Matthew 10:34)"

Thus the film is a refreshing reminder that any accusations of fundamentalism in non-Christian religions must be seen in the context of the past history and the continuing potential for, indeed the reality of, Christian fundamentalism.

While the youthful Venya comes across as even more fundamentalist than the priest, the latter nevertheless encourages him to join the priesthood, as it needs men like him.

The film possesses a distinctly realist feel. This is achieved, for example, by many unbroken long, restless takes by the highly acclaimed director of photography Vladislav Opelyants, as well as hand-held sequences. The lighting is notably realistic and captures the cool natural daylight of Baltic Kaliningrad, where the film is set. The concrete breakwaters of Kaliningrad's pier suggest ruins, in the context perhaps the ruins of the Soviet Union.

In addition, Serebrennikov used a large number of non-professional actors. The musical score communicates dissonant and tragic elements that contrast ironically with the sinister-sounding Slovenian metal rock hit "God is God" over the opening menu and closing credits.

Increasingly, the school appears to be changing into a church. The teaching staff, with the exception of Elena, have no arguments to counter the growth of fundamentalist religious ideas, no ideological defence. What hope is there? Only the film can tell. ★