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“COVID-19 has exposed the lie that free markets can deliver health care for all, the fiction that unpaid care work isn’t work, the delusion that we live in a post-racist world. We are all floating on the same sea, but some are in super-yachts and others clinging to drifting debris.”

António Guterres,
secretary-general
of the United Nations
18 July 2020

The global coronavirus pandemic has exposed the crass nature of the capitalist system argues **Jimmy Doran.**

In the early days, the so-called developed world hijacked, stole and diverted entire shipments of personal protective equipment. The US purchased the entire global stock of the important covid-19 drug Remdesivir; more than a thousand people on the British liner *Braemar* were abandoned on the high seas, blocked for weeks from disembarking at ports in the Caribbean after an outbreak of covid-19 among the passengers and crew. Cuba alone stepped in and officially welcomed the vessel to dock and helped to get all the passengers home safely.

Covid-19 is not the cause of the crisis in capitalism: it has exposed the effects of underfunding and the creeping privatisation of public health, housing, education, and transport, the race to the bottom, the withdrawal by the state from the provision of public services, and the environmental catastrophe.

Workers’ share of what they produce has been falling since the 1970s. To achieve this, anti-union legislation and union-bashing tactics have been adopted globally to restrict the power of labour. With the balance of power now tipped firmly towards capital, workers would need a law degree to go on strike. And the final decision is made by the courts, as employers take out injunctions to stop strikes.

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Capitalism is the virus

This has led to a decline in workers' struggle as unions are forced to compromise rather than go on strike. It has led to a generation of trade unionists with little or no practical experience of struggle. Union density is at a record low point, facilitating a race to the bottom in terms and conditions. Precarious employment, temporary contracts, minimum-hour contracts, the gig economy, bogus self-employment, atrocious working conditions, low pay and high rents are forcing workers to accept what they can get, the crumbs from the table, just in order to survive.

We are up against a formidable enemy in capitalism, as this class controls the narrative in the news and the mass media, which are owned and controlled by the ruling class. If a journalist questions or probes too much they won't be in a job for long.

Journalists are now mainly freelance—or, to put it another way, no permanent contract, surviving from day to day. The media may not be able to tell us what to think, but they can tell us what to think about.

Despite workers suffering wage stagnation and an ever-decreasing share of the wealth we produce—contrasted with the flooding up of wealth to the point where eight men have accumulated more wealth than the poorest 50 per cent of humanity—the membership of trade unions is still declining. The ruling class has divided us, using every manner and means: race, religion, sexual orientation, status, job, address, dress—you name it: they use it against us to keep us apart.

Opportunist politicians repeat the mantra that “unions are useless, they are all on big salaries, are in league with the government and employers.” But “if



you vote for us we'll change everything"—only to be abandoned by the same people when they themselves are voted into a well-paid job, to side

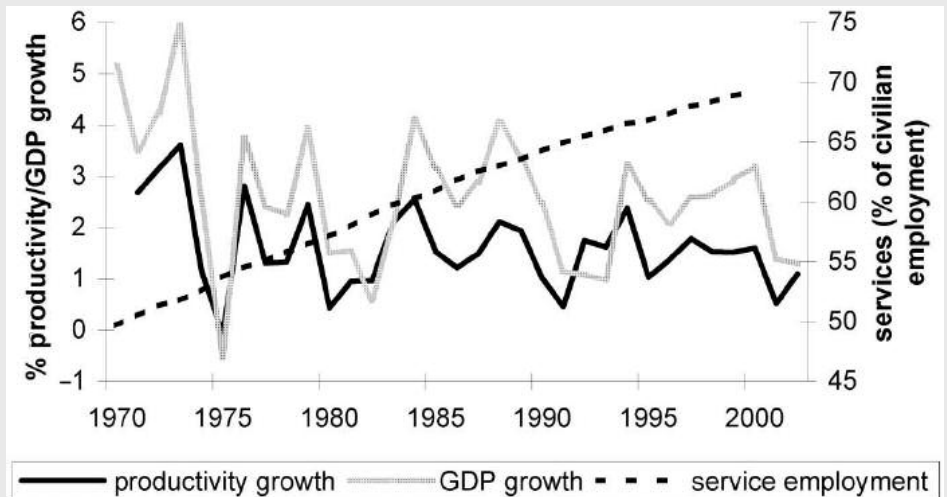
The end of the neoliberal social contract

DÓNAL Ó COISDEALBHA

A STRANGE THING happened in OECD countries between the 1970s and 2008: economic growth rates that looked poor on paper compared with the 1950s and 60s seemed to be boosted dramatically by a massive subsidy, somehow hidden from all national accounts statistics.

That subsidy, it turns out, was cheap labour and rapid automation in the manufacturing centres of the Global South. What western governments discovered was that, as long as imported goods of all kinds could continue getting cheaper, year after year, a lower and lower profit-wage share going to labour could be sustained without any fall in the real purchasing power of workers in their home countries.

Indeed it became a virtuous cycle for “core” capitalist countries. Consider how states tax imports and then tax their domestic circulation, along with taxing of all the services that wouldn't exist without the imports (retail, marketing, finance, consultancy, training, etc.). What these governments found was that



Service employment, productivity growth, and GDP growth in OECD countries, 1970–2002

amid apparently falling domestic growth rates they had such boosts to their coffers that they could maintain aspects of their welfare states even as they looted their own public domain by privatising public services and assets.

So it was that two global economies were created during this period, not one. Businesses in the Global South had to compete among themselves to produce low-cost goods for sale to the economies

of the core capitalist countries, and hence, even as their productive capability became more advanced, they had to keep repressing their workers' wages, sacrificing domestic development for “labour market competitiveness.” Firms in the capitalist core formed a separate layer of competing companies, dependent on but not in direct competition with their counterparts in the Global South.

We are up against a formidable enemy in capitalism, as this class controls the narrative in the news and the mass media, which are owned and controlled by the ruling class.

with employers and prop up the establishment.

This is not unique to Ireland: it's the same throughout the "developed world," from America to Europe and beyond. It's not an accident: it has been in development and planning since neo-liberalism was launched in the 1970s as capitalism's method of slashing labour's share of what we produce, and clawing back concessions in public services achieved after the Second World War.

We have been betrayed time and time again by weak leaders and treacherous politicians. **Trade unions are the members. You are the union.** There are still nearly 800,000 members. Yes, many have become soft and conformist. That needs to change. But rather than moaning about it, all workers need to join a union. If union density is to increase above 50 per cent this alone would make us stronger.

The problem with capitalism, however, is that you eventually run out of other people's surplus value. It comes down to the central problem, which Marx identified about 170 years ago: the falling profit rate. The exchange value of goods is determined by their cost of production; and when this falls below a certain level (because of automation) the internal regulating mechanism of the system—the profit motive—breaks down, making further private investment in automation nonsensical.

The investment therefore tends to flow into the service sector instead, which is incapable of sustaining profit growth (growth in extraction of surplus value from labour) in the way that offshoring and automating the factories of the twentieth century once did. In fact where services do achieve, or aim to achieve, that kind of growth it is only through monopolistic control over markets: think of Amazon, Airbnb, Google, Facebook, or Uber—the very definition of competitive capitalist market economies breaking down.

As Aaron Benanav of Humboldt University, Berlin, put it in non-Marxist language:

The real cause of the persistently low demand for labour is the progressive slowdown of economic growth since the 1970s, as industrial overcapacity spread around the world, and no alternative growth engine

But there is no point in merely joining: members have to play an active role, or the bureaucrats will continue to take the easy option. There is an old saying that says a union is like a wheelbarrow: only as good as the person pushing it. It's time to organise and fight back—start pushing against the race to the bottom. Nothing is ever won without a fight.

We must mobilise to have the Industrial Relations Act and all anti-union legislation abolished, to win the right to union recognition, the right to union access, and collective bargaining rights.

This will give us power and the means to fight and bring an end to precarious employment, to win proper pay and conditions, to give us decency and dignity in our lives, in a world where everyone can reach their full potential and nobody is left behind.

With more security and certainty of

materialised—a development originally analysed by Robert Brenner, and belatedly and obliquely recognised by mainstream economists under the name of secular stagnation or Japanification.

It turned out that you can have a significant economic expansion based on paying other people a lot less to do much of the labour that your economy would otherwise have to undertake itself. In such a situation you can even pay your workers in their low-value-creating service jobs the full value of their labour, or even more than its full value! Such workers can think of themselves as no longer being in the proletariat at all, so well does the system appear to work for them. As long as the surplus value is extracted somewhere else, by apparently unrelated people doing unrelated jobs half a world away, the system can remain profitable.

The "industrial overcapacity" identified by Benanav is at the root of what we have come to know as the "gig economy." The tap that allows for a constant stream of surplus value to make its way to the economies that Charles Maier of Harvard University called the "Empire of Consumption" has not been turned off, but the flow has been slowing for twelve years now.

Where, then, to find the profits that both private business and the capitalist state rely upon? The only viable option is

income we can fight for more, without fear of the bailiff or starvation—fight to win back the social wage, universal public health, housing, and education.

The two-tier health system is symbolic of the two tier-society in Ireland today. During the pandemic, front-line workers have been the backbone of the fight to defeat the virus. We have power in our numbers. The golf dinner event exposed the contempt the ruling elite have for ordinary working people.

The Gardaí have been given power to shut down house parties but not meat factories. They partied, while we cocooned.

The game is up. It's not a change of government we demand, it's a complete change of system, so we all share the fruits of our labour. We must organise and end the system that allows a handful of people on earth to rule all of humanity. ★

to raise the rate of domestic exploitation, i.e. find ways to make labour cheaper at home in order to make up for the reducing gains from automation that characterised the era of globalisation.

In many ways it is shocking how little the left and trade union movement here in Ireland has reacted to the hundreds of thousands of permanent work positions domestically that have quite suddenly become part-time, temporary work, agency work, banded-hours contracts, independent contracts, and so on. After all the hard-fought industrial struggles of the twentieth century it is startling that a company like Uber or Deliveroo can simply say, "We don't have employees, we have riders"; and so those workers, in one stroke, have no labour protection.

The truth is that the "gig economy" is simply capitalism in its standard form, within its regulatory framework, operating normally; the new profits have to come from somewhere. The era of globalisation was one of brutal exploitation, but it was only happening in other places. As we enter the post-covid era, with globalisation in headlong retreat, the "gig economy," now standing at about 10 per cent of Irish employment, and growing, will start to simply become known as "the economy." In the 2020s the class struggle is back on, but so far only one class has been launching offensives. ★



Covid, care homes and direct provision

RAYMOND Ó DUBHGHAILL

COVID-19 CONTINUES to wreak its ill-effects round the globe. Here in Ireland, as in many capitalist countries, the most vulnerable in society have been hardest hit by the virus.

In addition to the scandal of the meat-processing plants in the midlands, which saw the pro-business, anti-worker 26-county government “lock down” the populations of Cos. Kildare, Laois and Offaly before they would countenance shutting down any factory,¹ there are the shameful but perhaps less publicised cases of care homes, direct provision and homelessness to examine.

Covid-19 and care homes

The treatment of people living in care homes since the spread of covid-19, resulting in hundreds of deaths so far in this country alone, should be nothing short of a national scandal. The disaster follows a pattern that we can see repeated in neighbouring states.

In Britain it has been reported that the NHS instructed care homes to place blanket “Do not resuscitate” orders on all residents during covid-19 restrictions². This in part contributed to 26,500 “excess deaths” in these settings from early March to 7 August when compared with the 2015–19 average; and of these about 15,500 were covid-19 deaths.³

JIMMY DORAN

COVID-19 did not cause overcrowding in schools, but it has exposed it. Schools are reopening with up to thirty people in a confined space for extended periods. There are almost a million children, teenagers and teachers in four thousand schools.

In the two weeks before reopening, more than a hundred children between

Figures from around Europe suggest that up to half of all deaths attributed to covid-19 have been in care homes.⁴ In the south of Ireland that figure is over 56 per cent,⁵ accounting for 985 deaths up to 19 August,⁶ while in the north of Ireland that figure is 349, or 41 per cent of deaths.⁷ In contrast, there are approximately 48,000 nursing-home residents in Ireland (north and south),⁸ accounting for 0.7 per cent of the population. That is equivalent to 0.7 per cent of the total population of the country but approximately 50 per cent of the deaths.

Indeed at the height of restrictions it was reported that 500 patients were moved from hospitals into care homes in the south of Ireland.⁹ And at the end of July the entire board of the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA), the body that deals with care-home inspections in the Six Counties, resigned, citing in part their inability to accept the government’s decision to reduce inspections of facilities.¹⁰ A report in July stated that a fifth of some 32,000 care-home residents in the 26-county state were covid-positive,¹¹ a pattern repeated in the Six Counties.

No doubt there will be the usual limp inquiry at the end of all this; but the evidence points towards, at the very least, brutal negligence on the part of those tasked with protecting the elderly and vulnerable.

Direct provision

In April this year there were 7,400 people living in “direct provision” in Ireland.¹² This is a system whereby those seeking asylum are detained in prison-like conditions and given less than €40 a week with which to feed themselves, with the vast majority barred from seeking employment.¹³ This grotesque and inhumane system,

Schools should reopen when it's safe to do so

five and fourteen caught covid-19. More than forty schools in Germany were forced to close two weeks after reopening because of multiple outbreaks, with a thousand children forced to isolate.

There were thirty outbreaks in schools in England—70 children and 128 staff members. In America there have been almost half a million cases among children since the pandemic

Figures from around Europe suggest that up to half of all deaths attributed to covid-19 have been in care homes.

whereby centres are run by private organisations but funded by the state, makes multi-million annual profits for big business while costing the state more than €1.3 billion since its inception.¹⁴

Notably, inspections of direct-provision centres have been entirely paused during the pandemic¹⁵—this despite the intolerable conditions faced by those living in centres, some of whom were moved to go on hunger strike in protest at the end of July.¹⁶ By August there had been a total of 284 confirmed cases of covid-19 in direct-provision centres,¹⁷ equivalent to approximately 1 in every 25 people living in centres testing positive for the virus. Compare that with 1 in every 175 for the wider population. Figures like this are no accident.

Calls for the shameful system to be abolished have increased in recent months; however, the Government's commitments in this regard amount to little more than re-branding direct provision as a "non-profit-led" system.

It has frequently been pointed out that covid-19 did not cause the contradictions in capitalist society, it merely exposed them. With direct provision this seems abundantly clear.

Deaths of homeless people

The covid pandemic has also seen an unprecedented rise in deaths among homeless people, with ten homeless people dying in Dublin alone in July.^[18] Irish society continues to reap the bitter fruits of a housing system run for the benefit of developers and landlords.

The fact of thousands of vacant units and houses standing empty while people die without food or shelter in the streets illustrates the sick inequality at the heart of the capitalist system. The government would prefer to pay a premium to

hoteliers and other purveyors of short-term accommodation to house those in need than to pursue a solution to the problem.

If the bourgeois state cannot protect its vulnerable, what right has it to govern? None, certainly. However, we must recognise that capitalists do not see these issues in such terms. In crisis, they merely see opportunity.

Perfectly rational capitalist policies of enriching big business on the back of a crisis are misunderstood as "irrational" or "failing," when they are anything but! The Irish state is governed in the interests of capital, in all its hateful, racist, unequal and amoral glory. The sooner we perceive this reality in its simple clarity the sooner we can go about our necessary task, of building socialism. ★

Notes

- 1 Paul Hosford and Maresa Fagan, "400,000 people 'must adhere to rules' as Midlands goes back into lockdown," *Irish Examiner*, 8 August 2020 (<https://tinyurl.com/yy8hoo9t>).
- 2 Sarah Knapton, "NHS asked care homes to place 'Do not resuscitate' orders on all residents at height of pandemic," *Telegraph* (London), 23 August 2020 (<https://tinyurl.com/y3xqs8lq>).
- 3 Veena Raleigh, "Deaths from covid-19 (coronavirus): How are they counted and what do they show?" King's Fund (London), 19 August 2020 (<https://tinyurl.com/yywcmhx>).
- 4 Adelina Comas-Herrera, Joseba Zalakaín, Charles Litwin, Amy T. Hsu, Elizabeth Lemmon, David Henderson, and José-Luis Fernández, "Mortality associated with covid-19 outbreaks in care homes: Early international evidence," International Long-Term Care Policy Network, 26 June 2020 (<https://tinyurl.com/rgq7747>).
- 5 "Major nursing homes report calls for review of staff working conditions in wake of covid-19 crisis," *thejournal.ie*, 19 August 2020 (<https://tinyurl.com/yycmbp72>).
- 6 Conor Hunt, "Nursing homes report calls

- for review of staff terms," *RTE News*, 19 August 2020 (<https://tinyurl.com/y3mgjwpr>).
- 7 Gerry Moriarty, "Northern Ireland says total coronavirus-linked deaths now 855," *Irish Times*, 7 August 2020 (<https://tinyurl.com/y3kzywzk>).
- 8 Health Information and Quality Authority, HIQA News Updates, 21 July 2020 (<https://tinyurl.com/yxce2l9f>); "Up to 16,000 Northern Ireland nursing home residents at risk from coronavirus," *Irish Examiner*, 8 April 2020 (<https://tinyurl.com/y2zwf4oh>).
- 9 Trevor Quinn, "Coronavirus: Over 500 hospital patients transferred to nursing homes during height of pandemic," *Dublin Live*, 1 June 2020 (<https://tinyurl.com/y4rbvoq1>).
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- 13 Citizens' Information Board, "Services and entitlements for people seeking asylum" (<https://tinyurl.com/y2q4n65e>).
- 14 Shane Phelan, "Businesses making millions from direct provision as state pays €1.26bn to run centres," *Irish Independent*, 28 May 2020 (<https://tinyurl.com/yxdj8psj>).
- 15 "Inspections of direct provision centres paused during pandemic," *Irish Legal News*, 25 August 2020 (<https://tinyurl.com/yxrerg3p>).
- 16 Rachael O'Connor, "Asylum seekers at Kerry direct provision centre begin hunger strike against 'inhumane conditions,'" *Irish Post*, 29 July 2020 (<https://tinyurl.com/yxq3kj48>).
- 17 Fintan Walsh, "Chief medical officer: Covid-19 'outbreak' at Limerick direct provision centre," *Limerick Leader*, 24 August 2020 (<https://tinyurl.com/y3h8xvf6>).
- 18 Conor Hunt, "Ten people who were homeless died in Dublin last month," *RTE News*, 7 August 2020 (<https://tinyurl.com/yx1j6ff4>).

began. We have already had a number of clusters in creches.

Teachers and pupils do not have magical immunity. Ireland's unique school system depends on the private "voluntary" schools to operate as if they are a state body. Response from the various boards of management differs: some will get it right, many won't; but, as public servants, teachers deserve a national standard and have a right to a

safe place of work.

The Department of Education constantly spins as if it is asserting authority, but it never does. Medmark, the teachers' occupational health company, contracted by the department to adjudicate on staff illness, are encouraging teachers with underlying health issues to return to work, overruling the teachers' own medical advice and allowing the decision to be a

management one.

If outbreaks are inevitable in schools, why are standards not brought up to the highest level, instead of the watered-down version recommended for schools? Are schools to be the next covid hot spot?

Teachers and pupils are walking into a potential disaster, despite the warnings. Schools must not open until it is safe to do so. ★



Power to the working people

TOMMY McKEARNEY

Robert Owen, the nineteenth-century philanthropist, was by any standard a decent sort of bloke. He believed workers should be treated compassionately and that they deserved a reasonable standard of living. In fact he went a step further and attempted to build ideal societies in different countries, including one at Ralahine (Rathlaheen) in Ireland.

OWEN THOUGHT he could make his humane project universal by appealing for support to the good nature of wealthy capitalists. It hardly needs stating that his best efforts failed outright.

Yes, you may well snigger at his naïveté. So too did Karl Marx, who described it as utopian socialism. Nevertheless Owen's underlying assumption that it is possible to use moral argument to persuade the ruling class to surrender its position of wealth and power still retains purchase in many left-of-centre circles, including influential elements within organised labour.

No matter how hopeless the strategy, it is easy to understand why this Owenite view prevails in contemporary society. In the first instance, there is a persistent problem with inertia. Faced with a host of obstacles, many ask what can be done



to improve the situation. There is also in Ireland a particularly insidious, almost subliminal fear that to go beyond a certain line risks stoking the fires of insurrection. After all, our greatest labour leader was shot for doing just that.

Consequently, we are caught in the type of deadlock that has so many fulminating powerlessly at flagrant gross

DISCUSSION Defend the NHS

LYNDA WALKER

Articles 1 and 2, "Health of a Nation" (June and August) violate democratic centralism. Both are public attacks on CPI policy. I wrote a 2,500-word article criticising the inadequacy of article 1; article 2 is no better. Between congresses and coming up to congress it is protocol

that we discuss policy internally not on a public platform.

At our last congress the political resolution called for "A National Health Service for the whole of Ireland. This means a restructuring of the health service in the South and a defence of the NHS in the North" and "All the more important that we work to unite our people in Northern Ireland and

‘ . . . notwithstanding the understandable fury of the population, there is no constitutional provision to facilitate censure or removal of the governing coalition or to subject their performance to scrutiny by general election. . . ’

misconduct during the infamous Galway golfing beano. Though the event has been aired and analysed exhaustively, let’s just remind ourselves of two crucial factors.

In the first place there is the fact that this was not a solitary TD, regardless of position, acting badly: it was a representative cross-section of the Irish ruling caste, including judges, broadcasters, bankers, and business people, all at an event organised by senior members of the government party.

Secondly, and notwithstanding the understandable fury of the population, there is no constitutional provision to facilitate censure or removal of the governing coalition or to subject their performance to scrutiny by general election. If they hold together, we will be stuck with them until 2025. Moreover, as three opposition parties can testify, it’s not even possible to force the Dáil to convene if the Taoiseach decides against doing so.

Hardly surprising, then, that an EU commissioner and a High Court judge felt they could simply dig their heels in and contemptuously ignore demands to resign. As with the old utopian Owen, it would appear that the only option we are to be left with is to appeal humbly to the ruling class for it to behave better.

It is important to understand, however, that this dilemma does not only arise on rare and dramatically publicised occasions. This is the essential nature of the system of government under which we live. As James Connolly wrote, “governments in capitalist society are but committees of the rich to manage the affairs of the capitalist class.”

Hence the near impossibility of changing the stance of this “government of the ruling class” on a range of issues affecting daily the lives of working people. In spite of dire need, no meaningful attempt is being made to address the housing crisis, nor is there a serious effort under way to provide a

health service free and universally accessible to all at the point of entry.

Elsewhere there is the scandal of meat plants where, in spite of well-documented risks to the health of the industry’s work force, insufficient steps have been taken to ensure adequate inspection to enforce health and safety obligations. Compounding this is the widespread use of bogus self-employment practices, done in order to gain access to cheap labour compelled from economic necessity to tolerate harsh working conditions and, all too often, cramped, virus-conducive living arrangements.

All of this, don’t forget, is taking place in the context of an approaching economic recession exacerbated by the impact of coronavirus.¹ There is, quite simply, an urgent need to identify and promote a strategy that will allow working people to overcome this potentially ruinous situation.

It is imperative, therefore, to resist through developing structures capable of altering the balance of power. If this seems to be a purely theoretical aspiration, it need not be. In brief, working people can tap in to the unrealised strength that exists within the class and exercise it in their favour.

It is possible to do so, because the structures already exist, albeit not at present being utilised for this specific purpose. We have the trade union movement, with members in every part of the country. There are trades councils, community organisations and dedicated political activists throughout this land. We saw this powerful force mobilised during the Right2Water protest movement, so don’t say it can’t be done. Nor, indeed, as mentioned above, is there any shortage of issues on which to organise.

However, to succeed there needs to be a broad acceptance that any such movement is designed to create a countervailing working-class power base, something to challenge the influence

exercised by the current ruling caste rather than a vehicle on which to build a parliamentary career.

Progress depends on promoting the widest participation and overcoming political sectarianism. Organisational maturity is essential. It is pointless, for example, to blame trade union officials for lack of action if members don’t participate actively at branch level. It’s equally futile to criticise the labour movement if workers do not unionise.

There is an alternative to building working-class counter-power and it’s not attractive. At its most wretched we would see the rise of the far right exploiting the despair and disenchantment so evident last month at the “no masks” rally in Dublin. At best there would be further misery arising from re-running social partnership or the “class cuddle,” as recently described in the *Morning Star*—a worrying prospect of either living with the far right or watching as good people fall among Fabians.

Nevertheless, there is no irresistible force taking us in either of these directions. We can and must do better. It would be necessary as a first step to convene a series of conversations identifying how to proceed. Thereafter, the difficult but eminently doable work needs to begin. It is, quite simply, very much in our class’s interest to do so.² As Connolly said, “when questions of ‘class’ interests are eliminated from public controversy a victory is thereby gained for the possessing, conservative class, whose only hope of security lies in such elimination.” ★

Notes

- 1 See “Bankruptcy ‘a growth industry’ in US amid mounting distress,” *Financial Times* (London), 22 August 2020.
- 2 James Connolly, *Labour in Irish History* (1910).

IMAGE Top Left: New Harmony (uncompleted Owenite model housing)

Lower left: Robert Owen by William Henry Brooke (1772–1860) Wikimedia Commons

beyond on the basis of a programme against austerity, against the destruction of the NHS.”

The author uses contradictory facts and statistics showing “the failed socio-economic development as a result of British Rule” and states that many on the left fail to deal with the problem.

Unity, the weekly paper of the Communist Party of Ireland records

struggles of the left, trade unionists the women’s movement and others who have attacked and won fights for civil rights, public housing, and women’s rights, against higher unemployment rates, lower wages, the EU, British Army, internment, and sectarianism. Past *Unity*’s are in the National Library, Dublin; Linen Hall Library, Belfast; Marx Memorial Library, London.

These collective struggles involve revolutionaries who want a transformative change in the social order, as well as reformists who just want a better capitalism. Some don’t distinguish between the former and the latter, and today they might call Connolly “reformist” when he demanded school meals and the Old Age Pension Act. ★



Capitalist agriculture and the culling of small farms

EWAN MACDONALD AND GRAEME POWER

CAPITAL ACCUMULATION is one outcome of the irrational motor that drives our economic system. This is no less true for the agricultural sector than it is for industry. As capitalist production advances over time we witness a greater and greater accumulation of capital in fewer and fewer hands.

Let's consider land, for example. Marx discusses *terre-capital*, or "earth capital," as land that capital has been expended on in some manner for the purpose of acting as part of the means of production:

Capital may be fixed in the land, incorporated in it either in a transitory manner, as through improvements of a chemical nature, fertilisation, etc., or more permanently, as in drainage canals, irrigation works, leveling, farm buildings, etc. Elsewhere I have called the capital thus applied to land la terre-capital. It belongs to the category of fixed capital.¹

Land functions like any other form of fixed capital. With constant use in the absence of investment to maintain it it degrades to the point of uselessness. Thinking of land as a form of fixed capital, we can see how land has followed the general pattern of capital consolidation, as seen in fig. 1,

which shows the general decline in the number of farms in the 26 Counties.

The amount of arable land in use for crops and pasture has fluctuated since records began, in 1850, between approximately 5 and 4 million hectares, with the figures for 2013 best approximating the older data, with 4.9 million hectares of agricultural land in use.² We can correctly infer that the decrease in farm numbers has little to do with a decrease in farming; instead it represents a tendency for the inner logic of capitalist production to consolidate capital in the hands of fewer and fewer actors.

Some larger farmers reading this might be unconcerned about the fate of their smaller neighbours. After all, if you own a large farm you are in a better position to avail of economies of scale. Fixed costs, such as machinery and buildings, are cheaper per unit of output with large-scale production, giving them a competitive edge over their compatriots. Yet farming isn't a national affair, and even the most secure farmer would do well to consider recent history and reflect on the current trajectory for agriculture within the EU. If this persists, it is unlikely that even the most efficient Irish farms will be able to compete with large German, French and Polish competitors organising agriculture on an industrial scale.

While the Irish farmer may overwhelmingly own their own land, the surpluses that they produce are ultimately claimed by the factory-owners and the banks.

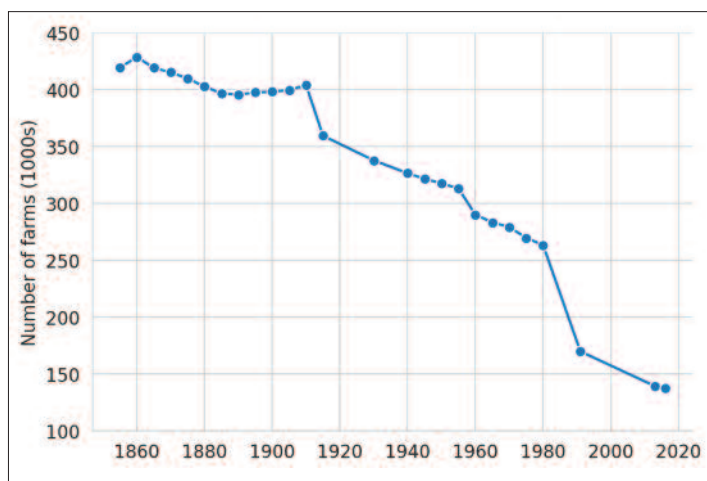


Fig. 1: General decline in number of farms

Source: CSO, 1860–1980, *Farming since the famine*. 2013–2016 and FSA01: Number of Farms by Farm Size, Region and Year.

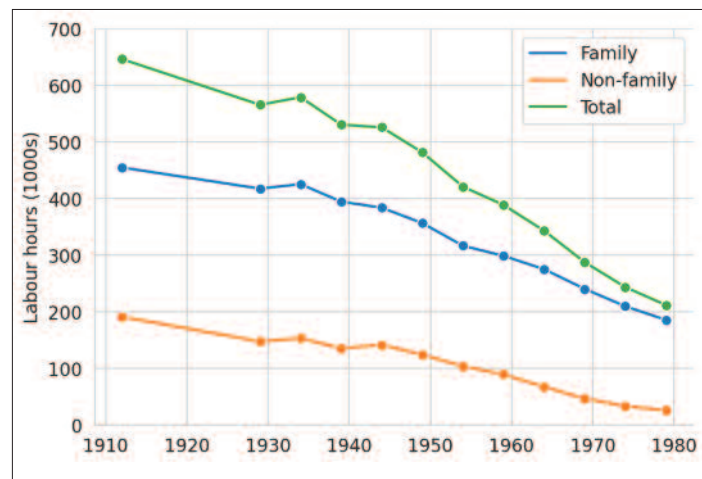


Fig. 2: Decline in males engaged in farm work, 1912–1979

Source: CSO, “Farming since the Famine, 1847–1996.”

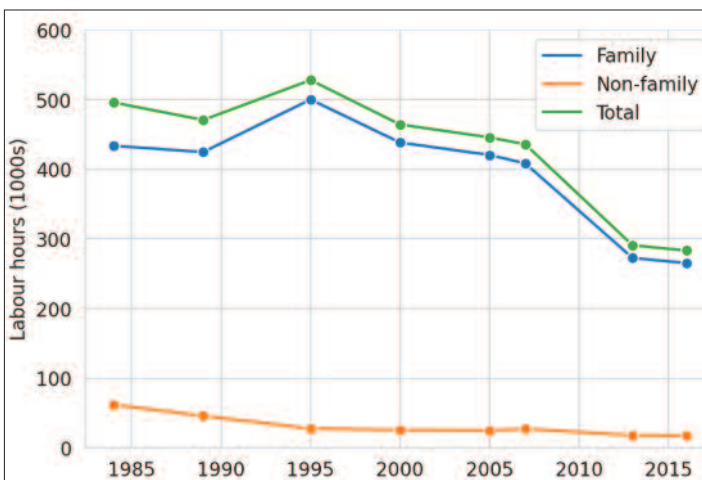


Fig. 3: Agricultural labour inputs, 1984–2016

Source: Compiled from CSO Statistical Yearbooks and Farm Structure Surveys

With a consolidation of fixed capital—dead labour, in Marx’s terms—there tends to be at the same time a decrease in variable capital, or living labour. This can be clearly seen in figs. 2 and 3, which demonstrate the decline in farm labour since 1912.

The family has tended to be the main social unit for agricultural production, even as far back as 1912, when 70 per cent of all labour was done by the family. As time has progressed, the portion of agricultural labour done by the family has only increased, to the point where in 2016 almost 94 per cent of all farm labour is carried out by the family.

It should be noted that the sudden increase in total labour hours observed from 1984 onwards stems in part from the novel idea that women’s agricultural labour should be recorded. The two data sources are not exactly commensurable, but they both point towards the same conclusion. As time passes, technology develops, capital consolidation occurs, and fewer and fewer hours of living labour are required in the process of production.

In a rational economic system this would be an excellent outcome. After all, who wouldn’t like to work less?

Unfortunately we know that the efficiencies associated with capital accumulation and technological improvement benefit neither the farmer nor the worker under capitalism. The farmer faces the choice of either drinking from the poisoned chalice of productivity bought with debt or deciding to become uncompetitive and ultimately reliant on subsidies (and the good graces of technocrats in the EU) for the greater part of their income.

As always, we must ask who benefits from the consolidation that occurs under the existing economic system. Is it the farmer, who must work harder and adopt the risks and costs of acquiring more fixed capital in the form of land and machinery to remain competitive? No, it is the factory-owner, the mill and the bank that profit from the farmer’s increased productivity. There is nothing mystical or natural about how our economic system works: it adheres to general laws of development, which have held true for hundreds of years. The conclusions one arrives at from understanding them are not pleasant for the majority of farmers or citizens.

The famous Mexican revolutionary Emiliano Zapata had a well-known saying, *La tierra es de quien la trabaja* [The land belongs to those who work it]. While the Irish farmer may overwhelmingly own their own land, the surpluses that they produce are ultimately claimed by the factory-owners and the banks. It is in all our interests to have an agricultural sector that remunerates those who labour in the fields, as well as the factories and offices, to the full extent of their labour.

Notes

- 1 Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3 (1894), Marxists.org (<https://tinyurl.com/y2eay5jt>).
- 2 Teagasc, *Agriculture in Ireland* (2017) (<https://tinyurl.com/y6ptrjqc>).

IMAGE: Part of Diego Rivera’s “History of Mexico” mural at the National Palace in Mexico City. The cropped portion features the images of Emiliano Zapata (left with sombrero), Felipe Carrillo Puerto (center), and José Guadalupe Rodríguez (right with sombrero) behind banner featuring the Zapatista slogan, *Tierra y Libertad* (Land and Liberty). Wikimedia Commons

Housing crisis for students

In 2019 there were 37,859 applicants on the social housing list in the north of Ireland. 26,387 of those were deemed to be in priority need of housing, described as housing stress; 74 per cent of those were considered officially homeless.

Belfast branch of the Connolly Youth Movement

THESE GRIM statistics are compounded by the fact that at present there are about 19,000 vacant premises in the North, with Belfast having the highest number, 3,213—maybe not enough to solve the housing crisis but surely enough to make use of and put some sort of dint in it.

So why aren't these properties used, and how are we dealing with the housing crisis? Why does it even exist?

As is characteristic of capitalism, basic human needs are viewed as a source of profit, housing being no exception. In 1971 the Housing Executive was set up, taking the power of allocation away from local authorities to help deal with sectarian discrimination in housing. For a while it was considered an international leader in public housing; in recent times it is far from that.

At the beginning of 2019, 3,943 homeless people had been on the priority housing list for more than five years. The Housing Executive is required to provide temporary housing to homeless applicants until permanent housing is available. The temporary housing that is provided is substandard, and people are forced to live there for far too long. In 2017–18 the average stay in temporary accommodation was 282 days, and in 2018 the average waiting time to be offered social housing was just over a year. However, the Housing Executive confirmed that

some people have been on the list for several decades. In 2019 more than two hundred people died while on the homeless register.

There is at present a huge shortage of social housing. In 2017 only 7,680 households were allocated a social home, the highest number of those being 958 in the North Belfast constituency. To help deal with this shortage the Department of Communities vowed to give priority to the supply of new social homes in their budget of £144 million. This should have increased the number of homes by 1,850 in 2019. However, by July 2019 the number of households in priority need was the highest on record. Despite this new record, between 2018 and 2019 fewer than a thousand new houses were built by the Housing Executive. At this rate it would take more than a decade to house even those considered homeless.

Adding to the housing shortage is the "right to buy" scheme. Introduced in 1979, this provides tenants and housing associations with the right to buy council houses at a discount. This allows investors to buy up council houses through deferred transaction agreements. In 2018–19 the Housing Executive sold 449 houses, and by March 2019 more than 123,600 had been removed from the social housing stock since the scheme began.

In 2013 a survey showed that a third of "right to buy" houses were now owned by private landlords; so it is no surprise that in June 2020 Sinn Féin, the DUP and the Alliance Party blocked an amendment that would abolish the "right to buy" scheme.

Although it is obvious that not enough use is being made of existing vacant properties, and that the buying up of social housing is even further worsening the housing crisis, the importance of building new houses should also be kept in mind.

The chief executive of the Simon Community (NI), Jim Dennison, pointed out that "we must not fall into the belief that the buildings needed to end homelessness already exist." Prof. Stewart Smyth echoed the importance of new housing in a recent lecture in

which he talked about the past, present and future of the Housing Executive. A researcher, trade unionist and activist who has carried out extensive research into the housing crisis for the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance, Prof. Smith argues that the building of new houses under a fully funded housing executive would be essential for providing secure and decent homes as well as generating jobs.

While the building of new housing would be ideal, it is very hard to do so without the support of the government. Many people argue that if Stormont was operating the crisis would somehow be dealt with. This is obviously a nonsensical idea when you consider that the housing crisis existed long before Stormont collapsed.

A clear example of Stormont's incompetence in dealing with the needs of the working class can be found in its decision to drop a plan for social housing on the site of Mackie's textile factory in West Belfast—one of the highest areas of need, with five homelessness hostels within a few miles of the site itself. Instead there is now a plan for private developments on the site adjacent to Mackie's.

We also face a unique situation in the North, where we still, to an extent, live in a segregated society. Many nationalists won't or simply can't live in predominantly unionist areas, and vice versa. So up crops the problem of "Where do we build houses, and who will live there?"

The Girdwood housing plan provides an example of this problem. This was a plan to build sixty houses on the site of a former British army barracks. It had been delayed for years because of disagreements over the housing allocation between nationalists and unionists. This disagreement in itself ignores the fact that housing is not only required by the nationalist and unionist communities but also by immigrants and refugees; so where do they fit in? The plan was then to create two separate blocks of housing, even though 95 per cent of newly built housing in North Belfast was needed by Catholics.

We also face a unique situation in the North, where we still, to an extent, live in a segregated society

Another question now arises: What have people been doing to combat the housing crisis?

In Belfast the housing struggle has centred on a small number of political activists. In the autumn of 2018, ACORN (the Association of Community Organisations for Reform Now) South Belfast was launched. The group was made up largely of student activists, with People Before Profit being heavily involved. A number of quick victories against letting agents' fees were won, with many agencies conceding to demands with just the threat of a picket on their premises. These victories resulted, for a short while at least, in eleven agencies no longer charging illegal letting fees.

While there is a large student rental sector in the area, the careerism that is endemic among student activists led to the demise of the movement. All operations of the tenants' union ceased once a council election was called and the organiser (a member of People Before Profit) stood for election in the area—once again showing how electoral politics smothers rather than emboldens working-class movements and power.

Several months later, in the summer

of 2019, the socialist republican group Lasair Dhearg consulted members of the CYM, the IRSP and Saoradh about forming a tenants' union and pressure group in West Belfast. The group was structured horizontally to avoid what was dubbed "bureaucracy" and "single-group control," which inevitably left it with a lack of accountability and structure that was desperately needed after the experiences with ACORN. This group was successful in pressuring letting agencies in the area through threatening pickets to repeal illegal fees, and the group began to explore building the union itself.

The Beechmount and Mid-Falls areas of West Belfast were decided on as the targets for the summer, with door-to-door calling both to recruit and to get an idea of the housing issues in the area. This came and went, with little success. People in the areas were either long-term house-owners, didn't know their landlords, or were content with their living situation. This raises the question of why this area was chosen. It was a result of the lack of structure and accountability that came with the group's horizontal structure.

The group began to decline after Lasair Dhearg moved into new

projects, and the housing struggle moved mainly into the Student Renters' Group, a tenants' union based in Queen's University Students' Union set up by a Lasair Dhearg member Ciarán O'Brien alongside CYM members and independent student activists.

The Student Renters' Group has been effective in becoming a source of information for tenants, with on-line social groups used more effectively. Door-to-door calling was once again employed, but this time over a much longer period. There are at present more than four hundred members in the Student Renters Support Forum.

The covid-19 crisis has halted all activity as students returned to family homes. The Student Renters' Group mainly dealt with advice and support for student tenants in gaining access to support funds and liaison with local representatives, such as Gerry Carroll, to propose protections for student renters, such as a rent holiday and being let out of leases early.

The Student Renters' Group will continue in the new academic year, with talks continuing about building a branch of the Community Action Tenants' Union (CATU) in Belfast. ★

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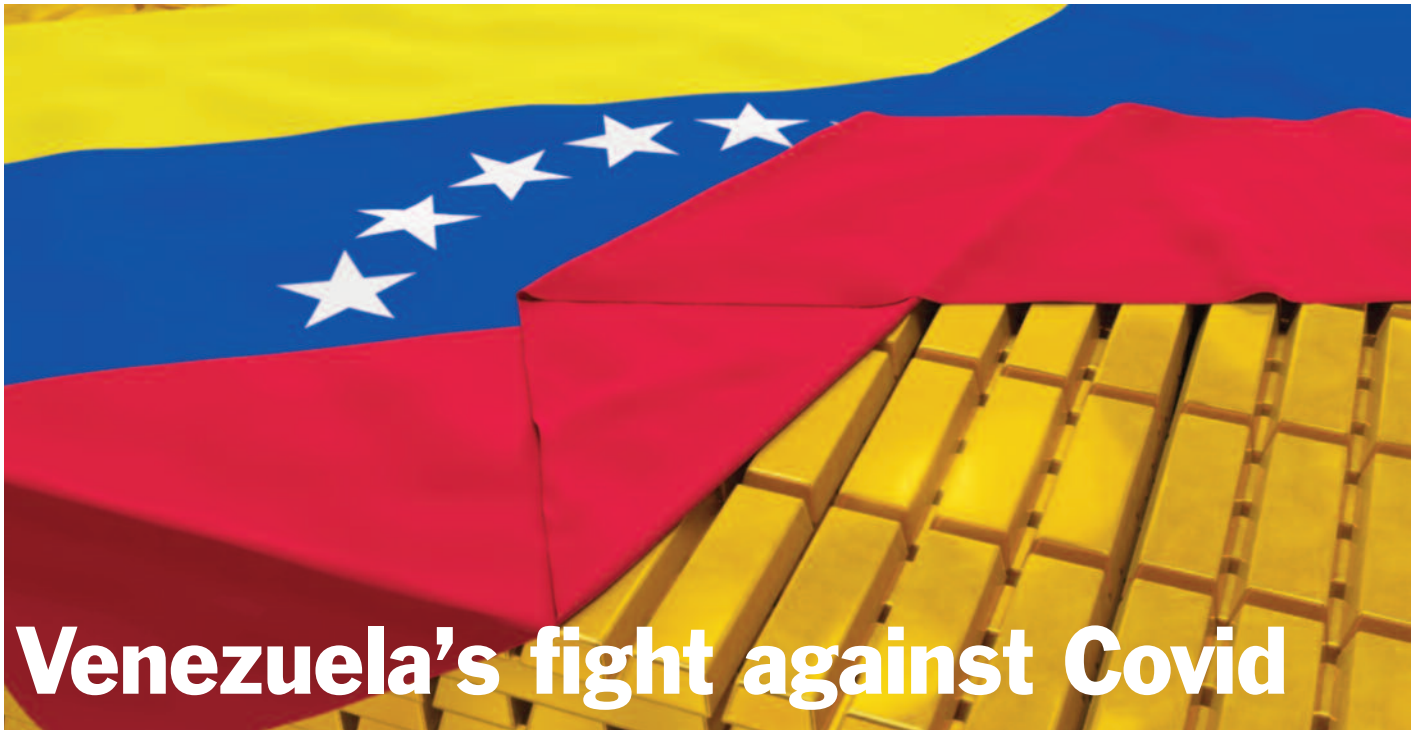
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Venezuela's fight against Covid

PAUL DOBSON

HOW CAN it be that Venezuela, a country that is so terribly battered by an imperialist blockade, nearly a decade of underinvestment, frequent examples of bad decision-making, wide-reaching corruption and technical brain drain, in addition to recent neo-liberal and anti-worker economic policies, including privatisation and asset-stripping, is managing to keep covid-19 rates significantly lower than its regional partners?

While community transmission rates—which are largely caused by the return of more than 70,000 migrants who found themselves unemployed and without social coverage as the pandemic battered the continent—have driven up daily case counts to about 1,000, no collapse of the Venezuelan health

system on the scale of Brazil, Ecuador, Peru or, most recently, Bolivia has been observed so far.

For corporate media that prop up imperialist pretensions in the region this is unacceptable and spits in the face of their regime-change rhetoric, forcing them to twist, distort and decontextualise the reality once again so that it may fit their pre-established script.

We see the *New York Times* (19 August 2020, reprinted in the *Irish Times*, among other media) dress up many standard global counter-pandemic measures to further their shareholders' and financiers' infamous political goals.

One of the criticisms the *New York Times* makes of Venezuela is that the police and National Guard are charged with implementing its nationwide quarantine, which began on 17 March,

when the first cases popped up and in which only priority shops are allowed to open, such as pharmacies and food shops. Inter-state travel was restricted, schools and public events closed, and international borders shut. The use of policing to handle quarantines is, however, commonplace around the globe, including many European countries; and by singling out Venezuela the *New York Times* only exposes its hidden defamation agenda.

Another attack it throws against Venezuela concerns the construction of makeshift camps on the border, as well as the implementation of obligatory 14-day quarantine and the crackdown on illegal crossings void of sanitary controls, all of which are necessary measures and similar to those applied by other countries, hardly worthy of the Orwellian overtures used.



HISTORY

The IRA and the Nazis

BRIAN HANLEY

IN JULY 1940, after the fall of France and with a German invasion of Britain seeming imminent, the IRA leadership explained their attitude to the war in a public statement. In it they made it clear that if German forces arrived in Ireland they would come “as friends and liberators of the Irish people.” This was because, the IRA asserted, the “Third Reich” was the “guardian and energizing force of European policy” and was committed to the construction of a “free



No collapse of the Venezuelan health system on the scale of Brazil, Ecuador, Peru or, most recently, Bolivia has been observed so far.

The *New York Times* also suggests heavy-handedness in dealing with those who break quarantine measures and put the collective health at risk. While a handful of cases have been reported, the common treatment for quarantine-breakers is a two-hour police video on social responsibility before being sent home—a far cry from the sky-high fines applied in Britain or the mass arrests in other countries, and certainly not deserving of the term “dictatorial.”

Other measures the *New York Times* fails to mention include the regular disinfecting of streets and crowded sites, strict sanitary controls on public transport, and the use of controlled quarantine environments in local hospitals and state-financed hotels for those infected, not unlike similar measures applied at the later stages of the Spanish or British pandemics.

However, there are a host of other real problems that Venezuelans face in fighting the pandemic, which are largely overlooked by the mainstream media as their pre-written and largely stale disconnected storytelling takes centre stage.

With Washington’s unilateral coercive measures limiting Venezuela’s access to international bank accounts, credit lines, and foreign assets, as well as threatening punitive measures against any public or private entity trading with the country, Venezuela has struggled to purchase enough medical supplies, including PCR tests, face masks and gloves, for its population of 30 million people. Even a UN-brokered scheme, which would have resulted in medical supplies reaching Venezuela in exchange for the country’s \$1 billion

worth of gold commandeered by the Bank of England, was blocked by the British government in a cruel expression of global piracy.

Venezuela is therefore reliant on donations from the Pan-American Health Organization, the World Health Organization and the United Nations, as well as commercial exchanges with those governments willing to defy the United States, including China, Turkey, Russia, and Iran, as well as sizeable delegations of Cuban doctors, which have all helped alleviate the pandemic.

But deteriorating material conditions in the country, for which a combination of causes exists, including external imperialist meddling and internal inefficiency and corruption, are increasingly undermining these efforts.

Virtual schooling, for example, has all but failed, because of collapsed telecommunications networks and regular power failures, leaving a whole generation without education, largely thanks to a lack of public investment in these important areas.

Equally, government promises to cover the wages of small and medium-sized businesses have largely evaporated, and direct bonus schemes have only alleviated the economic situation without providing any structural solutions.

Water and fuel shortages caused by a deteriorated infrastructure and a lack of repair parts or prime materials, as well as increasing poverty and malnutrition caused by a profound economic contraction, have also exasperated day-to-day problems and mean that any large-scale covid outbreak will have a devastating impact, especially given the fragile health service.

For Venezuela’s upper classes, most of these problems are solved by throwing money at them, using specially assigned dollar-priced fuel stations, private water tankers, personal satellite connections, and even private electricity generators.

It is the poorest who are forced to choose between poverty and their health, frequently breaking quarantine to work, shop, or use overcrowded public transport, where infection is rife. Equally, it is the working class who are forced to make do with the minute amounts of soap or disinfectant they can afford in the current crisis of Venezuelan capitalism, with its rampant inflationary impact and decreasing real wages.

Venezuela’s popular masses have demonstrated their elevated levels of social discipline and collective organisation time and again, but it is the class division and the impact of increasingly neo-liberal government policies on the people that will ultimately determine the national infection rate. It is the effectiveness (or not) of the government’s socio-economic agenda that will allow Venezuelans to stay at home or force them out into the streets.

Finally, it is the building of a popular correlation of forces that could apply enough pressure on the state to guarantee effective collective protection during the pandemic, and not the balderdash printed by the *New York Times*, that is the principal challenge for Venezuelans today. ★

LEFT: a UN-brokered scheme, which would have resulted in medical supplies reaching Venezuela in exchange for the country’s \$1 billion worth of gold commandeered by the Bank of England,

and progressive Europe.”

Indeed the IRA stressed that the Germans desired “neither territory” nor “economic penetration” in Ireland, only the “freedom of civilized nations from the intolerable yoke of Britain.” As evidence of this they pointed to “Herr Hitler and Signor Mussolini’s” recent success in installing a “Catholic government” in Spain, against—they claimed—British opposition.

Responding to the statement in *Irish Workers’ Weekly*, Seán Murray asked whether “any follower of Pearse or

Connolly [could] seriously entertain the notion that the issue in this war is for a free and progressive Europe?” While recognising the hypocrisy of British imperialism, Murray argued that the IRA’s statement betrayed a “total misunderstanding of the issues at stake in this war” and that their stance aligned them with the “slayers of Republicanism and nationhood on the Continent [and] with the governing autocracies of Italy, Spain and Germany, against the revolutionary movements of these countries.”

Furthermore, the Nazi “theory of the superior race” and “doctrine of overlordship” made it clear what their real attitude to “subject nations” would be.

This debate remains relevant, as the recurring controversies over the memorial to the IRA leader Seán Russell illustrate. Russell, who had led the IRA from 1938, died in August 1940 on board a German U-boat, returning from discussions with Nazi leaders about aid for his organisation.

Continued overleaf



A voice raised against war

JENNY FARRELL

Erich Maria Remarque,
*All Quiet on the Western
Front* (1928)

The IRA and the Nazis

This summer his monument in Fairview Park (which also commemorates all the republican dead of the 1940s) was vandalised, allegedly by anti-fascists. This occurred shortly after the statue had been criticised by Fine Gael's Leo Varadkar. Many republicans responded by closing ranks, suggesting that Russell only sought foreign aid in the tradition of Tone and Casement and was in no sense a Nazi "collaborator."

The opportunism of Fine Gael aside, there seemed little willingness to examine what exactly the IRA's relationship with the Nazis amounted

THE FIRST WORLD WAR was described as "the war that will end war," so great was the horror of this new, diabolical stage of industrial annihilation. We know today that, without seriously addressing the causes of war, or the greed for new markets and spheres of power, wars

to, or indeed the political context in which the statue to Russell (above) was unveiled.

The reality was that Russell's accession to leadership of the IRA marked a move to the right by the organisation. While Russell was notably uninterested in political debate, under his tutelage men with pro-Nazi views, such as James O'Donovan, gained prominence within the IRA. Republicans were quick to remind Fine Gael of its fascist history, but there seemed little awareness among them that during 1940 IRA leaders had themselves been keen to enlist the aid of the former Blueshirt leader Eoin O'Duffy.

By that year republicans were

will continue, no matter what. However, the Great War gave birth to an anti-war literature hitherto unknown.

Mainstream cultural life in the twenty-first century largely ignores wars, nor has it embraced twentieth-century anti-war cultural heritage. Yet anybody who reads the novels and

mixing with former Blueshirts in a variety of pro-German organisations. Throughout the war fascist groups, notably Ailtirí na hAiséirghe, made determined efforts to influence the IRA, with some success. Indeed the notorious speech by the Aiséirghe supporter Oliver J. Flanagan TD, in which he praised Nazi policy towards the Jews, was part of an attack by him on government moves against the IRA.

The IRA's own rhetoric in that period went beyond simply hoping for a British defeat and echoed Nazi themes, particularly anti-Semitism.

After 1945, despite the realities of Nazi rule being laid bare, there was little desire to reflect on this. Hence, in 1951 the unveiling of the

All Quiet on the Western Front by Erich Maria Remarque is arguably the most famous anti-war novel of all time.

poetry, listens to the music, watches the plays, looks at the paintings or hears the songs of those who lived through the horrors of the First and Second World Wars cannot fail to be profoundly shocked and motivated to really put an end to war. Perhaps that is why these works of art are as good as absent from mainstream culture.

All Quiet on the Western Front by Erich Maria Remarque is arguably the most famous anti-war novel of all time. Published in 1928, it was one of the greatest book successes of the first half of the twentieth century. The picture it paints, the inhuman reality of war, reflected the experiences of millions of soldiers.

At the heart of the story is a group of young soldiers who go from school straight onto the battlefield. Their dehumanising by adapting to industrialised slaughter becomes the turning-point in their lives. They ask questions about who is responsible for the war, but have no answers. While the novel never reveals the imperialist interests of the world war, it nevertheless condemns the powers that criminally abused Remarque's generation. What holds them together is their camaraderie, a humanity they preserve.

Ten years after the publication of this novel the idea of camaraderie was to be exploited by the German fascists for their new war plans. However, in Remarque's book this comradeship has nothing to do with "leader" and "followers" in aggressive militarist interest. Rather, it is a sense of

solidarity among those who need to support each other, and this extends to the soldiers in the "enemy" trench. They understand instinctively that the enemy is a victim of the same powers as they are.

In a memorable scene, the central character is caught in a shell hole along with the French soldier he has just killed. He asks, "Why do they never tell us that you are poor devils like us, that your mothers are just as anxious as ours, and that we have the same fear of death, and the same dying and the same agony—Forgive me, comrade, how could you be my enemy?"

Remarque's unvarnished portrayal of the war hit a nerve with the public. It became an immediate best-seller in Germany and internationally. In the 1920s it was translated into twenty-six languages; today there are editions in fifty languages, with an estimated circulation of between 20 and 40 million copies. The title has become synonymous with the senselessness of war, the senseless of ordinary people dying in the interests of profit and power.

Remarque was born into a Catholic working-class family in Osnabrück in June 1898. When world war broke out in 1914 he was sixteen. Like so many, he fell victim to the jingoist propaganda and joined the Youth Corps, a militaristic cadet organisation. Aged eighteen in November 1916, he was conscripted. Shortly after seeing action on the western front he was wounded in July 1917 and spent more

than a year recovering and was not sent back to the front.

In May 1933 Remarque left Germany for Switzerland, having had to flee overnight after being warned by a friend that he was in danger. His German citizenship was revoked, and he never returned to live in Germany. He left Switzerland for the United States on the eve of the Second World War and became a naturalised US citizen in 1947.

In 1943 the Nazis arrested Remarque's youngest sister, Elfriede Scholz. She and her husband had stayed in Germany with their two children. She was found guilty of "unpatriotic" views and was beheaded on 16 December 1943. Remarque only discovered what happened to her after the war, and dedicated his novel *The Spark of Life* (1952) to her. German publishers omitted the dedication, as Remarque was still considered a traitor by many Germans. Although he was repatriated as a German citizen after the war, he remained isolated from German cultural life and died in Switzerland fifty years ago, on 25 September 1970.

All Quiet on the Western Front has lost none of its power. It is an outstandingly sensitive depiction of the effect that murderous warfare has on the human psyche. We still need books like this. ★

IMAGE: Scene from *All Quiet on the Western Front*. 1930. USA. Directed by Lewis Milestone.

monument to Russell was accompanied by commentary that celebrated his time in Nazi Germany. An account in the *United Irishman* described in detail Russell's interaction with leading Nazis. It even claimed that the IRA leader and his organisation had been given a significant role in "Operation Sealion," the planned invasion of Britain.

Many of Russell's contemporary defenders note that since he had visited the USSR in 1925 to seek Soviet aid but was not a communist his visit to Berlin should be judged in the same light. The political context was very different however.

Republicans had been broadly sympathetic to the Soviet Union after

1917, and the Comintern was pledged to support uprisings against colonial rule. The Nazis made no such claims to anti-imperialism. Indeed until the late 1930s the republican press had denounced the Nazis precisely because of their reactionary politics, *An Phoblacht* condemning the Luftwaffe's bombing of Guernica, for example.

Russell and his allies chose to ignore all of this. Indeed Russell's opponents within the IRA alleged that his leadership bid was supported by funding from Nazi sources. Russell's visit to the USSR went unmentioned during the unveiling of his statue in 1951, presumably because it would have been politically embarrassing in

the intensely anti-communist atmosphere of the day. Yet, in contrast, his being feted by the Nazi leadership was considered unproblematic and indeed presented as a measure of his importance.

Raising these issues is not a matter of retrospective moralism. As Seán Murray's article illustrates, they were the subject of debate at the time. Russell himself may not have cared very much what the Nazis stood for, but seeking an alliance with them had potentially disastrous consequences. Republicans might do well to discuss what exactly welcoming the Germans as "liberators" might have meant, and how, and why, the IRA had ended up in that position. ★

Respect Belarusian sovereignty!



DORIAN Ó SEANÁIN

IT'S A FAMILIAR story: Western imperialist forces are orchestrating another coup in a sovereign state while the bourgeois media in Ireland bombard us with sympathetic coverage of anti-government protesters and the “democratic opposition,” whose ranks are brimming with the most vicious reactionaries.

Behind the scenes, the United States and the European capitalist powers are providing considerable resources to the fifth-columnists. The parallels with the coup of 2014 that has devastated Ukraine ever since are undeniable. Almost thirty years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the NATO war machine plans to intervene and clear the way for foreign capital to wreak havoc in Belarus, as it has done everywhere else in eastern Europe since the days of the Warsaw Treaty.

Despite the economic collapse brought about by the counter-revolution of the 1990s, Belarus avoided the fate of many other former socialist states by retaining state-run industry and the social safety net. Instead of the country's resources being sold to the highest bidder, President Lukashenko's programme ensured that Belarus kept substantial control over its own affairs.

Contrast this with Boris Yeltsin's presidency in Russia, where mass privatisation and a collapse in living standards marked the aftermath of the Soviet era. Russia has since drifted out of the American orbit, much to Washington's chagrin. Installing a puppet regime in Belarus would complete the military occupation of Russia's western border.

Of course the present government of Belarus is not without fault. It is clear that thousands of Belarusian workers have grievances, which have led them to take to the streets in protest. However, the government still commands the support of most of the people. More importantly, Belarusians appreciate that their country's sovereignty is under threat.

Not surprisingly, the Western media refuse to report on

large pro-government, pro-sovereignty protests, many of which are far greater than anything that has been whipped up by the reactionary opposition.

The Belarusian people have much to fear from the experiences of their neighbours and from the array of forces that are orchestrating trouble. Indeed few countries have beaten the war drums in recent weeks with more fervour than the Baltic states. Given that their foreign policy amounts to letting NATO use their territory as a military base from which to co-ordinate the Pentagon's schemes, it is not surprising.

The fact that the opposition candidate, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, has retreated to Lithuania since losing the presidential election in August is no coincidence. The Baltic states have all adopted the euro in the last ten years, but not before implementing EU Central Bank rules that led to wages being slashed and public services being cut. Not surprisingly, the dictatorship of capital in these countries has made use of fascism to carry out its bidding.

Anti-communism, anti-Semitism and the rehabilitation of Nazi collaborationists are central elements of the prevailing reactionary ideology, as in Ukraine. In contrast, the material conditions for a significant fascist movement have not yet developed in Belarus; but the sight of red-and-white flags (left) dominating opposition rallies shows that anti-communism and historical revisionism motivate many among the “democratic opposition.” The red-and-white flag was used by an anti-Bolshevik government declared in 1918, which was ultimately powerless. In addition, the Belarusian Soviet Republic suffered the highest number of deaths as a proportion of population during the Great Patriotic War.

Delegitimising the Belarusian election and the status of Lukashenko as president of Belarus have been the central messages communicated by the bourgeois media over the last few weeks. As usual, workers in Ireland and elsewhere are being fed a line that is coming straight from the US State Department.

That Lukashenko has shortcomings is not remotely the point. Each time a coup is being planned by the imperialist powers their opponent is inevitably labelled a “dictator.” Just as in Syria, Ukraine, and Venezuela, the question boils down to this: Are you objectively siding with the anti-imperialist forces—or with the imperialist ones? There is no “third way,” as many leftists try to argue, whereby one can condemn both sides equally and sit on the fence.

The response from communist and workers' parties has been clear: Respect Belarusian sovereignty! Reject the EU-US-NATO intervention in Belarus! ★

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