

LEFTLINE

Radical analysis from the Irish Socialist Network

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LOOKING AFTER OUR OWN

When people stop believing in socialism, it often turns out that they don't just believe in nothing: they'll believe in *anything*. Whether Pat Rabbitte ever believed in socialism in any real sense is a question we can leave to the boys down at forensics, but he's certainly prepared to pin his tail to any donkey these days.

Having sold what was left of the Labour Party's soul to Enda Kenny — cheaply, because damaged goods fetch little in any market — his latest brainwave is to call for restrictions on immigrant workers.

Raising his eyebrows conspiratorially, he informs us that there are forty million Poles out there, you know,

hoping his listeners will take fright at the prospect of them all descending upon us like avian-flu-ridden turkeys.

The truth is a lot less dramatic, of course. Ireland is finally catching up with the rest of the world, with about 10% of our population now coming from abroad. Far from robbing the poor old Irish of the fruits of the Celtic Tiger, the vast majority of immigrant workers are taking up jobs that Irish people now find too unpleasant or badly-paid. And the few who have beaten Irish people to a job against the odds deserve it, and are doing no more than millions of Irish people have done in other countries.

When workers are confronted with social or economic problems, we can respond basically in one of two ways. Either we point the finger at the businessmen and politicians who are truly

responsible, or we turn in on ourselves and find someone else to blame. From the bosses' point of view, racism is extremely handy as a ready-made scapegoat.

What Rabbitte has achieved is to tip the scales a bit further against a class response and in favour of a racist response. He has turned attention away from the conflict of interest between classes, and towards an imagined conflict of races. He has brought into respectable discourse the notion that a group of workers are the problem that needs controlling, rather than the capitalist class and its behaviour. If that notion takes hold, it will choke off any prospect of decent working-class politics, never mind socialism.

It has to be said that many working-class people are prepared to go along with Rabbitte here. An opinion

poll suggests that 80% of people agree with restrictions on immigrant workers, about the same amount that voted for McDowell's racist referendum in 2004. This is one of those occasions when socialists need the courage to stand up against the tide of popular opinion.

Not so long ago, it was commonplace for trade unions to oppose the entry of women into the workforce, or to allow it only on unequal terms, on the basis that they would undermine the position of male workers.

It was eventually brought home to them that it was precisely that sexist prejudice that undermined the position of *all* workers. Workers have to organise together on an equal basis to get anywhere, and that includes fighting the specific discrimination that women workers face.

The same principle should apply with immigrant workers. Some basic principles of solidarity and internationalism need restating. A worker, whatever country he or she comes from, is our brother or sister; a capitalist, even if he only comes from down the road, is our enemy.

It's often said that 'we should look after our own'. Well, immigrant workers *are* 'our own': the Filipina nurse, the Nigerian bus driver, the

Polish building worker are all 'our own'. But instead we have a labour movement that says there are too many of them, while it proceeds to treat our enemies as 'partners'. Is it any wonder that the unions are failing to organise these workers?

A workers' movement that really welcomed immigrant workers would be a very different movement indeed. Just as the women once excluded from unions often turned out to be the best trade unionists, Irish workers could do with a shot in the arm from those Rabbitte wants to keep out. The most militant part of the Irish working class last year was the Turkish part, the workers who fought Gama's exploitation and SIPTU's indifference.

Indeed, we should ask ourselves if our movement is worthy of immigrant workers. A May Day demonstration in Dublin must be a pathetic sight to someone from Nigeria, where one-day general strikes against the government are a regular occurrence. Poles whose parents built a union movement in the teeth of repression from Stalinist generals must be singularly unimpressed by a movement that can't even close down a company that sacks you for wearing your union badge.

Abstract welcomes are

meaningless unless backed up by action from our movement. As a matter of principle, Ireland's borders should be open to anyone who wants to come here: anything less goes at least part of the way with Rabbitte, and reduces us to a sick discussion on how many people should be turned away because of their ethnic or national origins.

The medieval system of work permits should not be modified or improved, but scrapped entirely. Asylum seekers, currently condemned to compulsory unemployment, should be allowed to work, and the threat of deportation lifted from them.

A nation that oppresses another, wrote Marx, forges chains for itself. Unless the workers' movement in Ireland welcomes and fights for immigrant workers, it's going nowhere fast. We cannot rebuild a real workers' movement without 100% opposition to the racism faced by a growing part of our class.

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THE DUBLIN RIOTS

Some of the initial frenzy provoked by the Dublin riots has passed, and we can start to judge the long-term impact.

The usual suspects in the media made a determined effort to blame Sinn Féin for the trouble, which was only to be expected. The fact that Sinn Féin had told people to ignore the loyalist demo, and condemned the rioting, made this task quite difficult. The anti-Provo brigade seem to have retreated from this fantasy for now, but don't be surprised if we see it rear its head in the future.

After all, the same people have casually re-written history, now referring to the "riots" of May Day 2002. The most clear-cut case of Garda brutality in recent years, captured live on video, can be magically transformed into a riot by the power of wishful thinking. The hand of the IRA Army Council may yet be found in this year's disturbances.

We were also reminded that large sections of the political class and the commentariat are determined to ignore loyalist bigotry. Again and again, we have been told that the "Love Ulster" crowd

were innocent victims, seeking to remind us of their pain.

Journalist Susan McKay has been a lone voice reminding people that its chief organiser Willie Frazer is an apologist for terrorism who is manipulating the suffering of northern Protestants to further his anti-democratic agenda. Frazer's comments about loyalist paramilitaries ("they should never have been locked up in the first place") haven't been given much of an airing in the southern media.

People were right to be angry when Robert McCartney was murdered by the IRA. But the hypocrisy of many commentators who shed crocodile tears for McCartney and his family should be clear. They can't muster any indignation when Frazer defends the loyalist death squads who murdered hundreds of Catholic civilians (some of them also from the Short Strand).

Nor did we hear about the views of his ally Jim Dixon, who told reporters: "It's wrong that blacks are coming to Northern Ireland ... I couldn't care less if people call me a racist. I couldn't care less what they think. Apartheid meant the black man was better treated and respected. Under apartheid,

the black man was better paid, they had better jobs, better everything. He was treated better than anywhere else in the world."

As Jeffrey Donaldson of the DUP demanded sympathy from the people of the Republic, nobody was churlish enough to remind him that Ian Paisley and the Orange Order had joined forces with loyalist paramilitaries to orchestrate several days of rioting in Belfast last summer. Such uncomfortable facts interfere with the agenda of those who want to blame republicans for every problem that arises in the north.

It remains to be seen what consequences the rioting will have north of the border. Some of the "Love Ulster" marchers went on the rampage in Portadown on the night after their failed demonstration. There's a real danger that loyalists will be looking for revenge when marching season comes around this summer. The Drumcree protest has been running out of steam in recent years, so the last thing we need is a revival.

On balance, it would have been better if the march had been able to go ahead. Willie Frazer came south looking for trouble, and he got what he wanted. Allowing a

loyalist march to go ahead in Dublin isn't the same as allowing the Orange Order to march down the Garvaghy Road: loyalism will always be an alien presence in the south, and its followers will never be able to stamp their authority on the people of Dublin.

The rioting has been a challenge for the Left. No socialist can join in with the establishment commentators denouncing "scumbags" and "skangers", whose class prejudice is clear as day. We can sympathise with the anti-police sentiment that was apparent (Fr Peter McVerry deserves credit for highlighting this motivation behind the violence). But this doesn't mean we should support the rioting.

The fact remains that the violence accomplished nothing, and will probably be damaging in the long run – not least by supplying the state with an excuse for hard-line policing. It's partly a failing of the Left that disaffected working-class people express their anger in such a counter-productive way: if we were stronger and more effective, there might be a more constructive outlet available. The rage that was in evidence on February 25th could just as easily be exploited by far-right elements if they establish a

foothold in Dublin.

One good thing came out of the trouble, though: indymedia.ie has gone a long way towards establishing itself as a credible source of news and analysis. Its coverage of the rioting was streets ahead of most mainstream media. The Murdoch/O'Reilly hacks were clearly irritated by the challenge alternative media outlets pose to their right to lie. As radical activism grows, the potential new media offers to challenge the corporate giants can develop further.

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THE BIN TAX - THE BATTLE GOES ON

If one were to rely on the mainstream media, one would think that the bin tax controversy is long dead. The issue rarely gets an airing, despite the attention granted to it by Eddie Hobbs in his popular Rip-off Republic series. But despite this, across large swathes of Dublin city, masses of people are still refusing to pay the charge.

This is hugely significant: if the Dublin campaign holds out and the Council fails to impose non-collection in working-class areas of the City, the question will remain on the agenda for the foreseeable future. What's more, it will open up the question again nationally, reminding people in areas outside Dublin that they are being forced to pay an unjust tax simply because they were not organised to resist.

Continued resistance will also impact in a general election, making this an issue in key Dublin constituencies, where parties such as Labour and Sinn Fein, and to a lesser extent the Greens and Fine Gael, will be vying with each other to be seen as the 'people's friends' by opposing unpopular policies such as the bin tax.

This is not to say that we can expect politicians of any hue to abolish or 'reform' the bin tax. But in the run up to an election they will be more sensitive to pressure and this may cause the Council's harsh tactics to be muted during that period - giving a breathing space to the campaign.

Another aspect of the bin tax issue that has been lost on the mainstream media is that this has been the most systematic and enduring campaign of organised working class resistance that has occurred in Ireland for years. This also explains the lengths to which those in power have gone to defeat it. The ruling class and their pet politicians, both right-wing and reformist, have learnt the lesson of the water tax struggle of the 1980s and 1990s: popular victories spur people on to more struggle and undermine the narrow boundaries of what is deemed as legitimate popular participation in politics.

From their point of view campaigns based primarily or even partially on direct action/civil disobedience must not be allowed to succeed because it opens up an 'awful vista' of struggle from below. This view is shared by reformist politicians and their allies in the union bureaucracy. They fear such a victory because it raises the idea that you can bring about substantial

change here and now through direct participation in active campaigning rather than passively waiting to vote Labour, in the vain hope that the Rabbittes and Howlins of this world will deliver from above.

This is why most trade union leaders, far from assisting the bin tax campaign, have actually played a decisive role in undermining the campaign, from the disgraceful attack by David Beggs on Joe Higgins and Clare Daly when they were in prison, to the sly leadership manoeuvring which resulted in a motion which supports the bin tax, albeit a more 'equitable' version, being narrowly passed at the last SIPTU conference. Both SIPTU and IMPACT bureaucrats have also played a key role in forcing the refuse workers to implement non-collection.

This should not surprise us: given the choice between a victory won from popular participatory struggle or a defeat which could discourage such activity, the reformists will invariably plump for the latter. Such a defeat of the Dublin City campaign would open up the way for privatisation and for the imposition of new charges. In other local authorities where the anti-bin tax campaign was defeated or never took off, the service has already been

privatised and charges are increasing all the time. The way would be open for the privatisation of the service in the city, and without popular backing and a demoralised workforce, the union bureaucracy would inevitably cave in.

After the intense period of struggle in autumn 2003, the view was taken by some that the campaign was actually defeated and there was no point in continuing to flog a dead horse since this would only sow illusions of victory amongst working people. The ISN disagreed with this analysis for a number of reasons. There was, and still is, mass non-payment in Dublin City so, in practice, large numbers of workers were continuing to resist.

The second factor is that even if widespread non-payment collapsed, there is no doubt that this is only one of many battles over service charges/local taxation to come, so it is essential to keep an active campaign alive albeit at a different level, using different tactics. In any case we also have a responsibility to those who have incurred large debts to defend them to the end.

Ironically, as we enter another potential phase of fierce struggle in Dublin over the bin tax, the campaign is better organised than it was during

the height of the protests of 2003, with regular central meetings, broad agreement of tactics and a strengthening of ties between the strongest areas. The reasons for this are diverse, but perhaps there has been a deepening and strengthening of the popular base in the well-organised areas, such as Finglas, Crumlin, Ballyfermot etc.

It is also due, to a certain degree, to a lessening of sectarian attitudes amongst the various left groups involved. A significant factor in this process has been the emergence of the Campaign for an Independent Left, which has brought about closer cooperation between two key groups whose members are heavily involved in the Dublin City Campaign, the ISN and the Community and Workers Action Group.

Although the campaign is by no means defeated, there is no magic formula for victory. A whole range of factors can have a decisive impact, including the conduct of the political forces involved, the will to maintain the struggle amongst a broad section of the working class, the success or failure of the court challenges and so on.

There is no silver bullet that will force the local authorities to withdraw or the central government to overrule and

whatever happens the struggle is likely to be protracted.

One lesson we have learned from the last few years is that diversity of tactics is essential to throw back the occasional offensives: maintaining a high level of non-payment, organising public meetings, flash blockades, binning bags and clean ups, as well as continuing to pursue the court cases. This is what has happened in the last month or two.

The City Manager's announcement that he would impose non-collection throughout the city proved to be just bluster. What happened in reality was a testing of the waters. Non-collection was imposed in some middle-class and unorganised working-class areas initially, and then a foray was made into Ringsend and one street in Cabra. The decisive response in those areas, where residents have successfully defied the Council's bullying tactics by organising collectively to throw the bags into the bin trucks has once again thrown back the offensive and halted the roll-out of non-collection in its tracks.

With the issue languishing in the courts for months to come, popular resistance taking on the council across the city and an election in the offing, one thing is certain; the battles

may rage but the war is far from over.

Colm Breathneach

IRAQ - THREE YEARS OF US-UK OCCUPATION

Three years after the invasion of Iraq, we can say that the warnings of the anti-war movement have been vindicated. The arrogance, brutality and cynicism of the Bush administration should be clear to all those with eyes to see. Tens of thousands of civilians have been killed, and the Iraqi people have been treated with contempt from the day the occupation began.

Some of the abuses committed by occupation forces in Iraq are well known. The images of torture from Abu Ghraib have circulated around the world. But other atrocities have been largely erased from public memory – at least so far as the media is concerned.

The brutal sack of Falluja in 2004 symbolises the cruelty of the occupation: it was an act of medieval barbarism executed with 21st century technology. The city was surrounded for eight weeks and heavily bombarded from the air.

Water, food, and electricity supplies were cut off. Although two thirds of the population fled, there were still almost 100,000 people

left when the assault finally came.

10,000 American troops then bulldozed their way through the city for three weeks. A Lebanese journalist described the horror endured by the remaining inhabitants: “There were American snipers on top of the hospital shooting everyone. The dead were buried in gardens because people couldn’t leave their homes. There were so many people wounded, and with no medical supplies, people died from their wounds. Everyone in the street was a target for the Americans.”

An “embedded” US journalist confirmed that Falluja was a free-fire zone: “When anyone does poke their head up, they’re almost universally considered to be a target.” According to the Iraqi Red Crescent, 6,000 people died during the assault, most of them civilians.

36,000 houses were destroyed, along with thousands of schools, shops and mosques. One American soldier who took part in the destruction remarked: “It’s kind of bad we destroyed everything, but at least we gave them a chance for a new start.”

All over Iraq, this pattern of

callous brutality has been repeated. Dr Jasem al-Aqgrab, the chief organiser of the Iraqi Islamic party in Basra, recently commented on the video footage of British troops beating young men to a pulp in his city: “Ever since the fall of Saddam Hussein’s tyrannical regime, abuses and atrocities committed against Iraqi civilians have been a regular, at times daily, occurrence throughout the country, including in Basra. These have been committed by American, British and Iraqi official forces. Hearing the British prime minister describe this latest incident as an isolated case fills me and fellow Iraqis with anger.”

If the dire predictions of the anti-war movement have been confirmed by experience, it must be asked why the mobilisation achieved on February 15th 2003 has not been sustained. The movement against the occupation of Iraq has not been able to repeat the unprecedented levels of support reached shortly before the war.

One undoubted factor is the feeling of powerlessness that was deliberately fostered by western leaders after the massive anti-war demo. Over the last two decades, the political and corporate elites in western society have worked tirelessly to eliminate

mass participation in politics.

Traditional left-wing parties have been transformed into conservative bulwarks, while trade unions have been battered into submission. The choice between Republican and Democrat, New Labour and Tory, is about as meaningful as the distinction between McDonalds and Burger King.

The F/15 mobilisation posed a huge challenge to this campaign against democratic citizenship. So pro-war, right-wing politicians were determined to ignore its message at all costs. Bertie Ahern was shameless enough to pretend that the marchers in Dublin were actually in favour of his government's policy, while Spain's Jose Maria Aznar sneeringly told the press: "I govern a country, not a street demonstration."

We were told again and again that it would be a dereliction of duty for elected politicians to listen to the popular will. The Spanish people (90% anti-war) had the opportunity to vote against continuing the occupation in the 2004 general election and they took it, leading to the withdrawal of Spanish troops from Iraq.

But the people of Britain and the United States weren't

so lucky: forced to choose between the architects of the invasion and pro-war opposition parties, they never had the chance to pass judgment on their rulers.

The contrast with the Vietnam war is striking. Anti-war activism at that time was combined with an upsurge of domestic radicalism, as shown by the civil rights movement in the US, the French general strike, and so on. But the Iraq war came at a time when political struggle in the west was at a much lower ebb. In order to bring the endless "war on terror" to a halt, the left-wing challenge will have to be rebuilt.

The situation in Iraq has also presented a challenge for the anti-war movement. The nature of the Iraqi resistance has been one major difficulty. Criminal acts have been carried out in the name of "resistance" by gangsters like Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi. Appalling sectarian attacks have been seized on by pro-war commentators to justify the continued occupation.

In Iraq, people have been able to distinguish between such atrocities and legitimate attacks on foreign troops. The Association of Muslim Scholars, the most influential Sunni group, is careful to separate "honourable resistance" and "terrorism".

But the images of suicide bombings have been a gift to the pro-occupation camp in the west, while the anti-imperialist left has had trouble steering a middle course between uncritical praise and sweeping condemnation of the resistance militias.

The criminal nature of some "resistance" groups has helped fuel the perception that a US withdrawal would be followed by civil war. There is no definite answer to this claim: we cannot know for sure what will happen after foreign troops withdraw until it actually happens. But we can say without any doubt that the US military presence is the greatest single cause of violence and instability in Iraq. The longer they stay, the worse things will get.

It's sickening to hear US and British politicians boast of their efforts to hold Iraq together, when their own policies have encouraged ethnic divisions. The pragmatic elements in the resistance have indicated that they will call a ceasefire if a strict time-table for withdrawal is announced.

That would leave a hard-core of religious fanatics who would be crushed by the Shia and Kurdish militias if they tried to seize power. A US withdrawal is actually the

best hope for avoiding civil war.

The main weakness of the armed resistance has been its confinement to Sunni areas. So far the Shia and Kurdish parties have not called for withdrawal: this has been another crucial prop for the occupation. Bush and Blair have claimed that foreign troops are needed to support Iraq's elected government.

The Kurdish leadership appears willing to follow the US line to the bitter end. They have entrusted the fate of the Kurdish nation to the same people who stood by and watched the gassing of civilians at Halabja.

The Shia position is more complex. The United Iraqi Alliance (UIA), the largest bloc in the Iraqi parliament, contains different currents. So far, the dominant tendency has been prepared to work with the occupiers: indeed, the occupation regime would have collapsed without their help.

But the radical Shia current led by Moqtada Al-Sadr has been gaining support by taking a tougher stand. Al-Sadr has called for the withdrawal of foreign troops, and his supporters are now the largest single group in the UIA. As opinion polls have shown, the Sadrists represent

the predominant view among Shia Iraqis: a clear majority wants a time-table for withdrawal.

Moqtada Al-Sadr is a reactionary, and the implementation of his social programme would be a disaster for Iraq. But it seems that the best we can hope for now is a speedy end to the occupation, leaving the possibility that things will then start to get better. Progressive forces will not be in any position to challenge for power for some time (although the western left should still do everything it can to help them).

One clear lesson should stand out from the experience of the last three years: anyone who argues that US military power can be a force for good in the world should be dismissed with the contempt they deserve.

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