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COVID-19

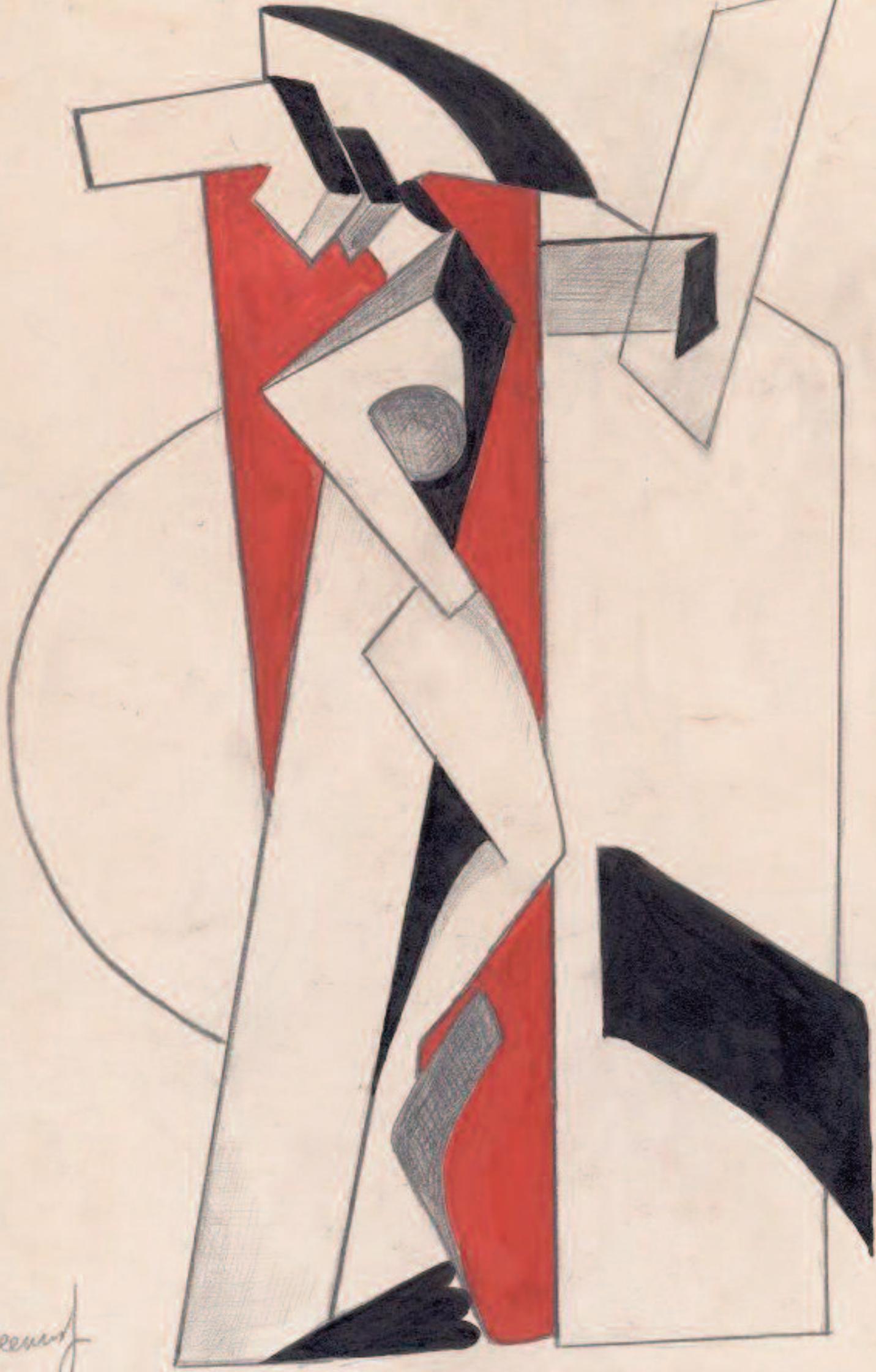


DISASTER CAPITALISM

& THE URGENT CASE FOR SOCIALISM

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- Keynes, the crisis of neoliberalism & why capitalism can't be reformed
- Transphobia & the Left: Bogus science & bogus Marxism
- April 1920: Revolutionary general strike in Ireland



Albert Bonnard

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COVID-19

DISASTER CAPITALISM

& the urgent case for socialism

The world entered a new period in history in 2020 with the onset of the coronavirus. What kind of world will exist after this pandemic is anyone's guess, but how we got here and how we can get out of this mess without fear of a recurrence are burning questions that have to be grappled with. EDDIE MCCABE & KEISHIA TAYLOR argue that the capitalist system itself is the central problem, and a socialist alternative has never been more urgent.

Capitalism must go.

Virtually everything about the world today screams this. Take for example that in the midst of a global pandemic, when 1.6 billion people are in “immediate danger of having their livelihoods destroyed”, according to the International Labour Organisation, the billionaires of this world have found a bonanza. Over four weeks in April, the 621 billionaires in the US increased their wealth by \$308 billion!¹ At the same time 30 million workers in the US lost their jobs.²

This fact exemplifies the insanity as well as the cruel injustice of the capitalist system. COVID-19 is a menacing disease and a serious threat in and of itself, but it must be stressed that the destruction being inflicted on the world today is not just the result of the virus – in many ways it could have been prevented. Rather, as we'll go on to explain, it is the result of an economic and social system that is constitutionally incapable of responding to a global health emergency in the manner required to safeguard the health and lives of the public.

Perhaps it's not surprising that a call for the overthrow of capitalism is the first thing you read in a socialist publication. It's true that for socialists the innumerable horrors in the world today – all forms of poverty, violence, oppression – can more or less all be attributed to the capitalist system that's dominated the world for the past 200 years. It's the system that puts profit-making before literally everything else, and socialists have long argued for it to be done away with.

What's more interesting and much more important, however, is that the realisation that “capitalism must go” extends far beyond (active or conscious) socialists. It's a conclusion that's dawning rapidly on millions of people. What other conclusion can really be drawn from the series of crises – nay catastrophes – that impend for the world we live in? Writing in a period of

comparable turmoil in the early 20th century, German-Jewish philosopher, Walter Benjamin, put it like this:

“Marx says that revolutions are the locomotives of world history. But the situation may be quite different. Perhaps revolutions are not the train ride, but the human race grabbing for the emergency brake.”

Whatever one thinks of the merits of this particular analogy, it does convey the urgency of the present situation. Never before has it been so apparent that capitalism is leading humanity to extinction – or that revolutionary socialist change is our only hope.

The year 2020

The year 2020 was the dawn of a new decade following twenty “lost years” in the 21st century, which more than anything were defined by wars, recession and political instability. Any idea that 2020 offered a chance for a new more hopeful start was quickly dashed by two major events in January:

The assassination of Iranian Major General, Qasem Soleimani, by a US drone strike on 3 January, inflaming tension between two nuclear powers, and raising fears of a new world war.

The terrifying images of Australian bushfires, exacerbated by global warming, which burnt more than 18 million hectares, destroyed over 5,900 buildings, killed at least 34 people and an estimated one billion animals. Gargantuan plumes of smoke reached as far eastwards as Chile.

Four months on and these events now seem like distant memories. In fact January 2020 will forever be remembered for the news that in the city of Wuhan in China, 11 million people were put on strict lockdown on 23 January to contain the spread of a novel coronavirus (first detected in December 2019). Cases had also been found in Thailand, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Vietnam, Singapore, Saudi Arabia and the United States by then.

Not a promising start, but even then few predicted that two months on there would be over 300,000 cases of the virus and 11,000 deaths globally; three months on and reported cases exceeded 2.6 million spanning virtually every country on the planet, with over 180,000 deaths; and at the time of writing (May) there are more than 4.7 million reported cases and 310,000 deaths – with, unfortunately, no end in sight.

A new troubling world

The effect of this pandemic on society has been earth-shaking. Hundreds of millions of people are in lockdown, unable to leave their homes except to buy necessary supplies. Billions of people’s daily lives have been massively disrupted due to enforced measures of social distancing, including self-isolation, cocooning and quarantining for those most at risk. Life as most people know it has ground to an eerie halt.

Mass social anxiety about the uncertainty of future

and genuine fears for loved ones are palpable – and for good reason. Much is still being discovered about this disease, including that as well as attacking the respiratory system, the virus is also attacking muscles, kidneys, circulatory system and the brain. It seems new strains may also be more contagious and despite earlier information about young children being less at risk, deadly illnesses linked to COVID-19 have been detected among children.

To compound the problem of the threat to the physical health of millions of people, agencies and experts now warn that “a historic wave of mental-health problems is approaching: depression, substance abuse, post-traumatic stress disorder and suicide.”³ In Italy, the first European country to be significantly impacted, with over 30,000 recorded deaths, this is now a major concern among survivors: “fear of dying, anxiety, depression, anger, panic attacks, insomnia and survivor’s guilt – all known to affect survivors of natural disasters and war – have emerged as common symptoms.”⁴ It doesn’t help that in most states mental health services were already hugely underfunded, fragmented and difficult to access.

In fact much of the stress that abounds in relation to COVID-19, is just as much about confidence, or lack thereof, in healthcare systems, and their ability to cope and treat patients adequately, as it is about the virus itself. Decades of neoliberal policies have decimated health services. Even the once exemplary NHS in Britain suffers from a shortage of doctors and nurses (there are currently 43,000 vacant nurse posts)⁵, working longer hours for less pay, as well as a shortage of hospital beds and medical equipment. Following a decade of Tory austerity 17,000 hospital beds were lost.⁶ Of course the situation is worse in the many parts of the world that never had a proper functioning universal healthcare system.

Added to all of this is the inability of the capitalist system to efficiently produce and equitably distribute personal protective equipment (PPE) in the quantities needed. Four months on and there are still major shortages, and ruthless competition between states to acquire whatever they can. Despicably, some manufacturers and suppliers are making a killing from this crisis, with NHS chief executives reporting inflated PPE prices of up to 825%!⁷ Clearly, emergency measures are in order to requisition and, where necessary, retool factories to upscale production to meet the demand – provided at cost prices. Profiting from a global pandemic is utterly unacceptable.

Economic crash exacerbates inequality

As an inescapable consequence of enacting measures to combat such an anti-social disease on a global scale, the world economy has gone into freefall; experiencing the sharpest downturn since the Great Depression — deeper and much more rapid than the Financial Crash in 2008. Such a dramatic shut-down of the global economy has never happened before, however it comes on top of economic trends pointing towards a



World economy nosedived as a result of the Covid-19 crisis, however major weaknesses were evident before the outbreak of the virus

downturn prior to the coronavirus crisis, so its potential depth and longevity should not be underestimated. Where things are headed is impossible to predict, but record highs of unemployment, public and private debt and state subsidies; alongside lows of investment, trade, production and consumer spending, are likely. The Bank of England has forecast that the world's oldest industrial economy will experience its deepest recession in 300 years.⁸

One remarkable feature of the current economic crash is that while the real economy has slowed down massively, stock markets have bounced back after an initial dramatic fall, especially in the US. This is linked to the unfounded optimism among some analysts that the economy will bounce back as soon as the lockdowns end, but no one knows when that will be, and a straightforward rapid recovery is unlikely even then.

Without a vaccine, moreover, a second wave of the virus is a real possibility – particularly given the reckless approach of some governments. While the world health organisation (WHO) has repeatedly warned against a premature return to work, the capitalist class is growing impatient. It is prepared to risk the health and lives of workers in order to return to business, regardless of whether it is safe to do so. And with continuing global shortages of PPE and testing behind where it should be in all countries, safety simply cannot be assured.

However the primary driving force behind the surge in the stock markets is the unprecedented injections of cash into financial markets by central banks, buying up corporate bonds and other financial instruments. This includes an historic €870 billion in packages from the European Central Bank,⁹ which was dwarfed by \$4.5 trillion from the US Federal Reserve which is even hoovering up risky “junk” bonds.¹⁰ This effective

bailout of the big banks and corporations, who can use basically unlimited loans from the Fed to buy back shares in their own companies, increasing their stock prices and in turn the bank balances of the super-rich elite. This bailout is the source of the billions of dollars currently being accrued at historic rates by the billionaire class. Jeff Bezos alone made \$24 billion between January and April, more than the entire GDP of Honduras – a country of 9.5 million people.

As always, such bailouts will ultimately be paid for by the working class – from whose exploitation real value in the economy is ultimately extracted, which is another reason why there is such a clamour from the capitalist class for an urgent return to work. The sheer lunacy of policies that funnel trillions of dollars into the coffers of the corporate elite should be registered. Clearly the economy would benefit much more if such bailouts were directed towards the working class and poor, who would actually spend it in the real economy, rather than simply adding to the cash piles of the likes of Amazon or Apple Inc. Not to mention what could be achieved if such resources were geared towards the world's health crisis, or housing crisis, or climate crisis, or poverty crisis.

Coronavirus — no bolt from the blue

Overcoming the problems we're currently facing begins with a thorough understanding of where they stem from. Amidst the shock and awe that millions of people are experiencing, a common refrain has been to accept the narrative from the political and media establishment that “we're all in this together”, which is reinforced by a widespread notion that the COVID-19 pandemic is essentially a natural disaster that nobody is responsible for and which nobody could have predicted. These notions are false, however.

The current pandemic was not unforeseen or unexpected, at least by the scientific community in the

field of pathology. In fact it was warned about in numerous scientific reports, which were treated with the same urgent action by governments as countless climate reports – they were effectively ignored. After the Ebola epidemic in 2014 which killed approximately 11,000 people, the World Health Organisation (WHO) developed a plan for urgent research and development of diagnostic tests, vaccines and medicine. In this plan, they identified the family of coronaviruses as a likely cause of another major epidemic.¹¹

As the Ebola crisis ended, the urgency of this plan dissipated and little was done to put it into practice. The private pharmaceutical and healthcare industries, motivated entirely by profit, shifted their R&D into other areas. Exactly the same thing happened after the SARS and MERS coronavirus epidemics, in 2002-4 and 2012 respectively, where work begun on vaccines was shelved as the outbreaks were contained, in favour of more lucrative ventures.¹² Only after the COVID-19 outbreak were these vaccines repurposed, but the work is years behind where it could have been. The madness of our reliance on a private pharmaceutical industry (worth over a trillion dollars annually) to safeguard our medical needs is illustrated by the fact that in 2018 a pitiful \$36 million was spent on researching coronaviruses,¹³ while over \$30 billion was spent on “marketing” in the US alone.¹⁴

Capitalist governments, meanwhile, proved just as incapable in preparing for new outbreaks. In 2019, world leaders and others gathered to conduct a simulated response to a hypothetical global health emergency.¹⁵ Their conclusion was that humanity was gravely unprepared. Just a few months later COVID-19 would demonstrate this in reality with devastating ferocity. Notwithstanding the warnings from such simulations; or previous epidemics; or the scientific reports; no increases in investment were forthcoming for more R&D, ventilators or PPE – nevermind hospitals or healthcare systems in general.



Ebola outbreak in 2014 should have served as a warning

There was, however, an increase in global military expenditure of 3.6% in 2019 to a colossal \$1.9 trillion – the highest rate since the Cold War.¹⁶ Scandalously, the US – the country worst affected by COVID-19 – spent \$35.1 billion just on nuclear weapons in 2019. This amount could have paid for 300,000 beds in intensive care units, 35,000 ventilators, and the salaries of 150,000 nurses and 75,000 doctors.¹⁷ All of which are desperately needed now. The weapons are useless – outside of the twisted logic of imperialist militarisation, at least.

The powers-that-be understood the potential for this to happen, which makes the under-preparedness of both the pharmaceutical industry and governments all the more criminal. To be clear, however, it is not incompetence that explains their reluctance to act. In the case of the pharma companies it can be explained by greed. After all, sickness is good for business. As Gerald Posner, author of *Pharma: Greed, Lies, and the Poisoning of America*, said recently: “Pharmaceutical companies view Covid-19 as a once-in-a-lifetime business opportunity”.¹⁸

In the case of the governments it stems from the pressure they come under both from big pharma and also big agribusiness. The latter are well aware that a significant factor in the emergence of new dangerous pathogens is a byproduct of their operations, and that real action to prevent further outbreaks would necessitate an end to those operations.

Agribusiness & habitat destruction

The culpability of big agribusiness for the current pandemic should dominate all serious discussion on the causes of and solutions to the crisis. It’s largely ignored by the mainstream media and establishment politicians, however. Instead there is increasing focus on China, in the West at least, and a narrative that suggests China is to blame for the outbreak and spread of the virus – whether due to its failure to act and warn others promptly enough (which there may be some basis to), or because of a conspiracy involving a laboratory at the Wuhan Institute of Virology (which there is no basis to). The latter of which involves dangerous myths, which are exposed by the evidence that exists.

The precise origins of COVID-19 remain unknown, although a wet market in Wuhan has been widely identified as a potential source. However as evolutionary biologist, Rob Wallace, noted:

“There are spatial clues in favor of the notion. Contact tracing linked infections back to the Hunan Wholesale SeaFood Market in Wuhan, where wild animals were sold... But how far back and how widely should we investigate? When exactly did the emergency really begin? The focus on the market misses the origins of wild agriculture out in the hinterlands and its increasing capitalization.”¹⁹

Wild species such as pangolins, snakes and civets

are consumed by the wealthy in China as a luxury, tonic and status symbol, and are also used for traditional medicine. The animals at these markets come from increasingly industrialised enterprises, as well as small-scale farms and wild hunting. Wildlife farming is worth \$18 billion per year, and was until recently backed by the state and justified on the basis of jobs in impoverished areas (6.3 million throughout China).²⁰ These larger scale wildlife farms tend to be located at the frontiers of human society, encroaching on forests and

wildernesses, and growing industrialised farms push wild food operators ever deeper in search of game.

The emergence of new pathogens tends to occur where humans, in the form of big business (primarily agribusiness) and capitalist governments, are drastically changing the landscape, destroying forests, depleting soil, intensifying agriculture, mining, and building roads and settlements. For example, the beef industry is responsible for 65% of rainforest destruction globally, and 80% of deforested land in the Amazon.²¹ Laws formally limiting or banning deforestation, where they exist, are circumvented or ignored by profiteering agribusinesses, as well as small farmers and loggers desperate to make a living with scant alternatives.

The encroachment of human activity into wild habitats disrupts ecosystems and damages biodiversity – which have kept certain pathogens in check over millions of years – shaking loose viruses, which then seek new hosts.²² Bats are adaptable to ecosystem change and with their unique immune systems, act as reservoirs for old and new viruses. Dozens of SARS-like viruses have been identified in caves in Yunnan, China, by virologist Zheng-Li Shi – viruses which could infect humans.²³ Human invasion of pristine forests brings these wild species and the pathogens they carry into contact with farmed animals, farmworkers and other people.

This new coronavirus is the sixth major epidemic in the last 26 years that originated in bats, mediated by a range of farmed, domesticated or hunted animals, such as horses (Hendra virus in Australia, 1994), pigs (Nipah virus Malaysia, 1998), civets (SARS in China, 2002), camels (Middle East Respiratory Syndrome,



Agribusiness in Brazil clearing the Amazon rainforest for cattle pasture

2012), and chimpanzees (Ebola in West Africa, 2014).²⁴ Hence there is nothing specifically Chinese about emerging diseases. Again, these cases – their frequency and severity – should have served as warnings for urgent action.

The danger of food production for profit

But instead, agribusinesses are willing to conduct massive planet-destroying deforestation, exploit workers for poverty wages and expose them to toxins and disease, and pave the way for viruses to spread to human populations, all in the name of profit. Capitalism allows these agribusinesses to externalise the costs (financial and otherwise) to ecosystems, animals, consumers, farmworkers, and governments. They would not be able to survive if they had to foot the bill themselves. Wallace argues that the agribusiness industry, “backed by state power home and abroad, is now working as much with influenza as against it”, and wields its wealth and power in a “strategic alliance with influenza” to protect its own interests against those of people and the planet.

Instead of the rapacious destruction of our natural world that is a fundamental feature of the capitalist drive for profit, we need to safeguard natural habitats, end deforestation and protect ecosystems to ensure that dangerous pathogens stay in the wilderness. If pre-pandemic trends continue, crop demand for human consumption and animal feed will double by 2050.²⁵ Barbaric and unsanitary factory farms, where livestock are plied with antibiotics leading to widespread antibiotic resistance, currently account for 72% of poultry production, 43% of egg production, and 55% of pork production.²⁶

Current approaches to food production must radically change. We need to engage in massive reforestation and rewilding as part of our endeavours to contain pathogens and reverse climate change. We need to end the barbaric treatment of animals in food production – factory farming should be eliminated, with alternative and decent-paying employment provided for its workforce. If animal agriculture is to continue, it must be at lower intensity, reject monoculture models, complement local ecosystems, and involve on-site breeding to develop immunities. Just as agribusiness commodifies and pillages our natural world, it exploits and oppresses its workers – we need a just transition to safe, sustainable food production and just distribution across the world’s population, including safe, quality jobs.

Public ownership and planning

With the billionaire class at the helm, industries and governments will not implement the fundamental changes needed to stop food production unleashing more deadly pandemics. The immense global food and agricultural industry was worth \$8.7 trillion in 2018²⁷ and accounted for 10% of global consumer spending, 40% of employment, and 30% of greenhouse-gas emissions worldwide in 2015.²⁸ Within that, power and wealth are concentrated, not only geographically, but in ever fewer giant multinational corporations. For example, only four corporations – ADM, Bunge, Cargill and Dreyfus – control of more than 75% of the global grain trade,²⁹ a feature likely to be intensified by the context of a global depression.

Production of something as fundamentally necessary as food, which can have such devastating global consequences in the wrong hands, must be organised on the basis of a democratic plan, not left to the anarchy of the ‘free market’. If the corporations dominating this industry can’t be relied on to put the interests of people and the planet ahead of their profits (and they can’t), then there is no alternative but to take them out of private hands and into public ownership.

With workers at the heart of management and as part of an overall plan for the economy the industry could be transformed and utilised to serve the interests of consumers, farmers, workers and the environment, with local, regional and global cooperation.

Such an aspiration is necessary and entirely reasonable. These are not utopian proposals. Quite the contrary; they are rational measures based on the reality and the gravity of the situation. In fact the same clearly applies to the pharmaceutical industry, which the pandemic demonstrates. The same applies to the energy industry, which the climate crisis demonstrates. Between them, these

three industries, which are supposed to provide central necessities of life, have a death grip on humanity’s ability to avert and respond to crises – of which we currently face multiple major ones all at once.

In the throes of the pandemic, the fragility of life as we know it, the flaws of the capitalist system, and the need for a socialist alternative are clearer than ever before. We are hurtling into continued coronavirus chaos and misery, the deepest economic depression in history, and the catastrophic destruction of our climate and planet. The question is who can pull the emergency brake, avert disaster and build a brighter future?

A world to win

It didn’t have to be like this. Even if we were to accept that outbreaks of new diseases are unavoidable in certain circumstances, the rapid spread of this virus was due to the delayed or insufficient action by governments, and even if some acted quicker and better than others, the globalised economy and society we live in today means we’re only as strong as our weakest link. Geopolitical tensions and destructive rivalries between different capitalist states are hardly conducive to the type of international cooperation that a virus outbreak necessitates. Trump’s sanctions against Iran, which have been maintained despite the outbreak and significantly increased the death toll there, is probably the most egregious example of this.

The death toll everywhere is significantly higher than it needed to be. If all hospitals and healthcare facilities were fully resourced with enough nurses and doctors and equipped with sufficient ICU beds, ventilators, PPE etc., countless lives could have been saved. That they aren’t, is due to the legacy of right-wing policies over decades and a dreadful failure by governments to prepare for an outbreak such as this – despite the warnings. As the virus continues to spread around the globe, including to poorer regions, these deficiencies will become even more glaringly apparent, with unfortunately tragic consequences.



Unsafe and inhumane mass factory farming must be eliminated

“In many ways... the crisis has also shown clearly who really runs the world – who we need and who we can do without. The working class – the labouring majority in every society, including those essential workers on the frontlines in health, retail, sanitation, transport and all the public services that are so crucial to the present effort – has once again demonstrated its position as the essential, progressive class. The capitalists offer nothing.”

The responsibility for all this lies with the capitalist market system, ruled over by the capitalist class and their political representatives. The coronavirus crisis is another major indictment of capitalism, and likewise another argument in the burning case for revolution and socialism.

In many ways, however, the crisis has also shown clearly who really runs the world – who we need and who we can do without. The working class – the labouring majority in every society, including those essential workers on the frontlines in health, retail, sanitation, transport and all the public services that are so crucial to the present effort – has once again demonstrated its position as the essential, progressive class. The capitalists offer nothing.

Workers already run the world in reality, we just don't own and control it; the billionaires do. But think of what the world would look like if workers did collectively own the economic and natural resources, and had the political power to democratically plan how we use them. Only then could we make sure no more lives are lost needlessly to this virus, and that measures are taken to prevent future pandemics. Or that measures are taken to stop climate change, or to provide quality housing, education and jobs for all, and achieve all of the other possibilities that human ingenuity is capable of but impeded by a dysfunctional and outmoded system.

The potential in this moment was summed up recently in the words of Arundhati Roy:

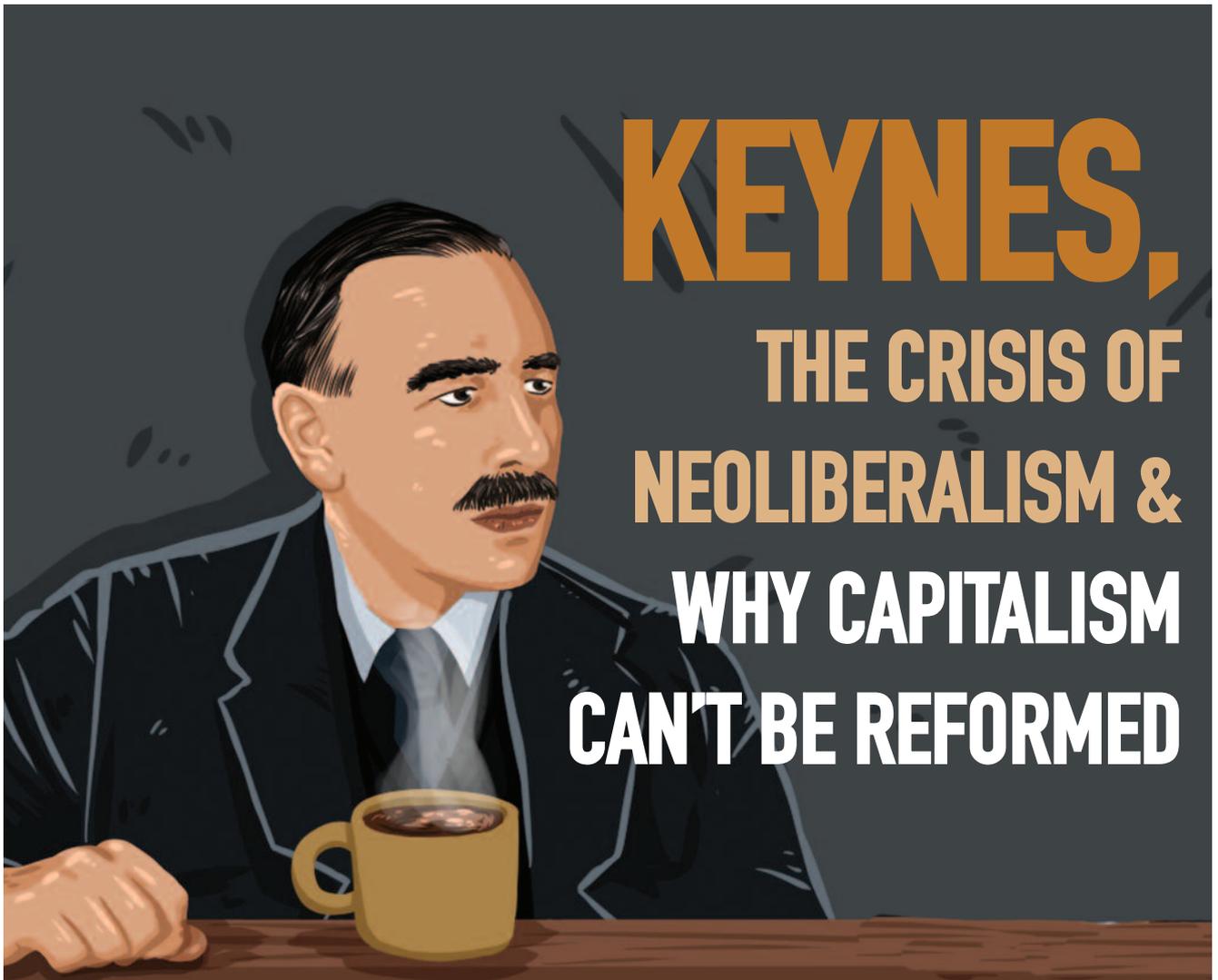
“Whatever it is, coronavirus has made the mighty kneel and brought the world to a halt like nothing else could. Our minds are still racing back and forth, longing for a return to “normality”, trying to stitch our future to our past and refusing to acknowledge the rupture. But the rupture exists. And in the midst of this terrible despair, it offers us a chance to rethink the doomsday machine we have built for ourselves. Nothing could be worse than a return to normality.

Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next.

We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.”³⁰. ■

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KEYNES, THE CRISIS OF NEOLIBERALISM & WHY CAPITALISM CAN'T BE REFORMED

Covid-19 has turned the world upside down, making all that was considered impossible now seem possible. In the context of a new crisis for capitalism and the undermining of the neoliberal order globally, the ideas of the liberal economist John Maynard Keynes will increasingly gain traction in terms of the policies of capitalist governments, writes CILLIAN GILLESPIE.

The Covid-19 crisis is wreaking devastating havoc on the lives of working-class and poor people throughout the planet. Not only in the form of the virus itself but also in the economic crisis accompanying it, considered by many to be the worst since the Great Depression of the 1930s. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) estimates that 50% of the world's workers will see their living standards decimated as a consequence of this.¹

This sharp economic downturn comes just over a decade after the Great Recession of 2008. The recovery that followed was weak and massively lopsided; deepening inequality by intensifying existing neo-

liberal trends of growing wealth disparity, increasing workplace precarity, stagnating wages, unaffordable housing and eroding public services.

In the context of the coronavirus crisis, however, capitalist states have been forced to take measures that break with the neo-liberal orthodoxy that they had been wedded to for several decades. This is perhaps exemplified in the decisions of the current Fine Gael caretaker government to – albeit temporarily – create a one-tier health system, with hospitals being brought into the public system; ban evictions; freeze rents; and increase public expenditure through, for example, the €350 'Covid-19 Unemployment Payment'. Throughout the world governments have quickly implemented stimulus measures on a scale greater than the period 2008-2009. For example, such a programme implemented by Trump recently accounts for 10% of the GDP of the US. In 2009 this figure, implemented over the course of months, was 5%.

The implementation of these policies is in effect a recognition of the limitations and indeed failures of the private market, and the necessity for state intervention and public investment to deal with a public health emergency of this scale. Of course, the same applies to the pre-existing emergencies in housing, mental health, climate change etc., which should also be recognised. The two-tier health service

in the South was evidently incapable of coping with a potential spike in those needing to access Intensive Care Units.

Neoliberalism exposed

The representatives of capitalism globally are clearly wary that a consequence of the current crisis will be an exposing of their system, provoking further political and social instability. Even prior to the outbreak of the Covid-19 crisis it was clear that the social basis of neoliberalism was being drastically undermined. This was witnessed last year in the revolutionary upheavals in countries as diverse as Sudan, Lebanon, China (Hong Kong) and Chile.

Closer to home, the election in the South in early February, which saw the vote of the two main parties of Irish capitalism fall to a historic low of 45%, is indicative of the process. Notwithstanding the existence of a growing economy, the housing and health crises fuelled by policies benefiting private profit created an enormous groundswell of anger. It shows the base of support for those parties of the so-called “political centre” (i.e. the traditional capitalist establishment) has been corroded by a decade of crises and inequality.

Given this vista of turmoil for global capitalism, the hegemony of neoliberalism, both ideologically and in terms of the policies of capitalist governments, is being further brought into question. State intervention, including increased public expenditure and even nationalisation (of failing companies), will increasingly come on the order. It’s likely then that the ideas, or variants of the ideas, of the economist John Maynard Keynes will be reembraced as far as the thinking of the strategists of capitalism are concerned.

This is also true of prominent figures and organisations articulating left-reformist approaches within the left and workers’ movement, such as Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasia Cortez (AOC) in the US, as well as the more right-wing and class collaborationist expression of reformism, such as that found in the leadership of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU). In fact, Keynes biographer Lord Robert Skidelsky has been invited to ICTU conferences to discuss alternatives to neoliberalism.² His ideas have acted as a political ballast for the idea that capitalism can ultimately overcome the crises that are inherent within it, and can be made more rational, and in turn more humane.

Who was Keynes? What is Keynesianism?

Keynes was not a socialist, nor of the workers’ movement, notwithstanding the fact that he is today a figure championed by many on the reformist left. He was a liberal economist born into the privilege of Britain’s ruling class. His famous dictum that, “The class war will find me on the side of the educated bourgeoisie”, illustrates whose class interests he was fundamentally concerned with. This was the starting point for his economic prognosis and solutions,

something that the champions of his ideas in the workers movement who believe that capitalism can be reformed have ignored and brushed over.

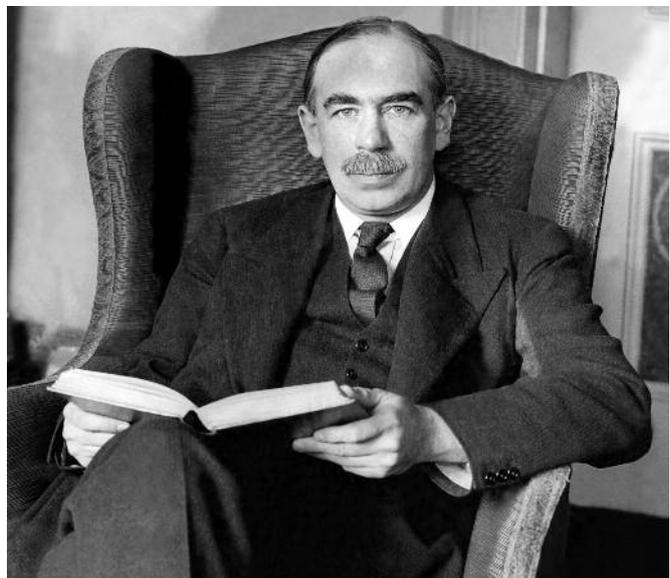
Exemplifying this approach, Brendan Ogle, prominent official with Unite trade union, wrote in his book *From Bended Knee to New Republic*:

“In essence, Keynes held that full employment and price stability could best be delivered not through complete market liberalism, but through Government intervention with policies that held the nation’s output as the key dynamic to be considered rather an individual’s. Keynes, you see, believed in ‘society’.”³

Keynes and his ideas came to prominence and gained traction initially in the interwar period where economic crises developed in the aftermath of the chaos of the World War. The Russian Revolution and the further revolutionary upheavals that emerged from these events posed a real existential threat to capitalism. This was particularly true with the onset of the Great Depression from 1929 with the emergence of mass unemployment and the devastating impact this had on the living standards of working-class people globally.

Mainstream capitalist economists at the beginning of the Great Depression doggedly stuck to the concept of the “hidden hand of the market”; insisting that supply and demand, competition and free trade – without state intervention – would naturally overcome the economic slump. The dynamic of a system based on private enterprise, they argued, was both self-correcting and self-regulating and would soon lead to a period of growth and an upswing for the system.

However, as the scale of the crisis became more apparent, Keynes and the capitalist governments he influenced, drew the conclusion that the ‘laissez faire’ attitude of the neoclassical school of bourgeois economists was simply not fit for purpose. Not only



Keynes was part and parcel of the capitalist establishment

was capitalism faced with the challenge of working-class revolt and revolution in many of its heartlands - there was also the existence of the Soviet Union, which was making significant economic strides in the 1930s, while capitalist economies faltered. The Soviet economy, notwithstanding the brutal, dictatorial rule of the bureaucratic caste that wielded political power headed and personified by Stalin, was based on state ownership and planning of its key resources, and demonstrated that an alternative to capitalism was viable. In a letter to newly elected US president, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Keynes starkly laid out the choice that their system was confronted with and why a change of course for was necessary:

“You have made yourself the Trustee for those in every country who seek to mend the evils of our condition by reasoned experiment within the framework of the existing social system. If you fail, rational change will be gravely prejudiced throughout the world, leaving orthodoxy and revolution to fight it out.”⁴

The Great Depression & the ‘New Deal’

Such a course for Keynes meant greater government intervention into the economy to regulate the blind forces of the market. In his works, such as his 1936 magnum opus, *The General Theory of Interest, Employment and Money*, Keynes emphasised the need for aggressive and inflationary state intervention and expenditure in, for example, programmes of public works, e.g. the building of airports, train stations and roads, to create employment. In doing so, they would stimulate “effective demand” on the part of working-class people, and in turn create a market for the goods and services produced by private capitalist companies.

Through the provision of infrastructural programmes that stimulate the economy and create direct employment, it is argued, the demand for goods and services is increased, incentivizing capitalists to invest their hoarded profits in production and enterprises and lay the basis for full employment. The advocates of an unregulated, free market capitalism believed in the concept of “supply side economics”, that is to say, that supply of goods via capitalist investment would invariably meet a demand (mainly from workers) in the market, an argument put forward by



FDR's "New Deal" in the US failed to end mass unemployment in the 1930s

the 18th century French economist Jean Baptiste Say. Therefore, it was simply a question of encouraging private investment in the economy via measures such as low corporation tax and de-regulation.

The first notable capitalist government to experiment with Keynes' ideas in the period of the 1930s was the Presidency of FDR through his famous “New Deal”. Roosevelt came to power against the backdrop of mass unemployment and resurgent trade union battles – with socialists, including the rank and file of the Communist Party (which soon grew to 100,000 members) and the small forces of US Trotskyism to the fore. Against this backdrop, his Presidency introduced a series of programmes to create employment and reforms such as the Social Security Act in 1936. While these measures helped to partially raise living standards and temporarily create jobs, it was not the decisive factor in lifting the US out of the slump. It must also be noted that US capitalism had greater economic reserves, as the world's emerging capitalist power, to implement the reforms implemented in the New Deal, unlike those of the declining capitalist powers of Europe.

Between 1934 and 1937, some five to seven million jobs in the US were created. However, this period of relative economic recovery was soon followed by a downturn in 1937-1939 and unemployment by the end of the decade stood at 10 million. The looming war in Europe and Asia, that US capitalism was eventually dragged into in December 1941, forced the creation of a new war economy, which did result in full employment and a new boom. This, not the measures of the New Deal, would prove critical to US capitalism overcoming the Great Depression that produced a decade of mass working-class struggle and general turbulence.

No solution to contradictions & crises

A key flaw in Keynes' analysis was that it failed to recognise the fundamental contradiction of capitalist production. Linked with this was his failure to answer the question of where the resources would come from to fund the stimulus measures that he advocated. Would it come from the profits of big business and the super-rich, or from new taxes (direct or indirect) on working-class people? The capitalist class do not invest for the purposes of meeting "demand", or social need in general. They are driven by the pursuit of accumulating short term profit. Raising wages and taxes on these profits will adversely affect profit margins and make capitalist firms less competitive relative to their rivals. They will always, in practice, resist policies that impact their bottom line.

Capitalists can provide finance in the form of loans to fund stimulus measures, but again banks and bondholders on the financial markets are there to make money, not to provide credit for credit's sake, and will ensure that such loans are paid at exorbitant rates -- adding to public debt, which has to be sustained or paid back with interest eventually. Hence, if the capitalist class are unwilling to pay for these measures, invariably it is the workers who will be forced to do so, thus once again undermining the market for goods and creating a new deflationary spiral.

It is also a mistake to assume that capitalist investment, as a result of higher demand for their goods, will lead to high rates of employment. The logic of capitalist competition means that the bosses will invest at a much greater pace in labour saving technology (as we see with automation in many fields today) than in the size of their respective workforces. New value in the course of production, however, from which all profits ultimately derive, is produced by the living labour of those very workers: not from the "dead labour" of machines or other forms of what Marx called "constant capital" -- raw materials, tools etc. Over time this process of replacing living labour with dead labour leads to a fall in the rate of profit, which in order to be restored requires renewed attacks on the conditions of workers -- cutting wages or extending the working day.

Keynes, and those who have championed his ideas within the capitalist establishment, as well as the left and workers' movement, sought to deny that there was a fundamental conflict of interest between the working class and the capitalist class. By their reasoning, if the state simply created demand amongst workers for goods and services the capitalist class would invest their resources into the system, in the interest of both classes.

In fact, the inherent exploitation on which capitalism is built means that it is fundamentally incapable of sustaining aggregate demand and overcoming the problem of "underconsumption". Workers never receive in their wage packets the full sum of the value they create. The surplus value goes to

the bosses, meaning the workers, who also make up a large share of the consumers, can't buy back all the things they produce, resulting in periodic crises of overproduction. Such crises are not automatic as indeed many goods produced by workers are for consumption of the capitalists or the super-rich, themselves such as luxury goods e.g. yachts and capital goods such as machinery for production and manufacturing. These commodities differ from those that are consumed on an ongoing basis by workers such as foodstuffs, clothes, cars etc.

There are other ways of getting around this contradiction, temporarily, to avoid (or delay) a descent into immediate crisis for the system. In the US, for example, where real wages have stagnated since the 1970s and where consumer spending accounts for 70% of economic growth, workers' spending has been fueled by the extension of cheap credit -- leading to record levels of private debt. But at a certain point these credit bubbles must burst, and the crisis happens with a vengeance.

The exception of the post-war boom

The period in which Keynesian ideas reigned supreme in terms of government policy, coincided with capitalism's so-called "Golden age". This being the enormous economic expansion that followed the Second World War. The vast destruction of cities, infrastructure and industry during the war and the rebuilding of the capitalist economies of Western Europe resulted in the restoration of the profit rates of the capitalist class. This boom, combined with the power of the organised labour movement (and in the shadow of the expanding Stalinist world whose power and prestige had been massively boosted), resulted in the system making significant concessions to the working class to cut across the potential for social upheaval.

US imperialism, which emerged from the war unscathed, now reigned supreme in world capitalism and the institutions it played a crucial role in establishing in 1944 at Bretton Woods conference (which Keynes himself attended), namely the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, played a key role in promoting state interventionist and Keynesian policies. This resulted in significant increases in the living standards of workers, particularly in the advanced capitalist countries, in the form of rising wages and state expenditure being expanded to fund free health, education and public housing in many states. Alongside this, there was a greater share of public ownership in the economy, what's often been termed a 'mixed economy'.

The degree to which Keynesian ideas became the orthodoxy of global capitalism was perhaps best summed up by US President Richard Nixon in his famous declaration in 1971; "we are all Keynesians now". Under the pressure of a militant labour movement in the US, and against the backdrop of the Vietnam war and an explosion in struggle for black,

women's and LGBT liberation, his regime implemented reforms that went totally against his political instincts. As well as being a Cold War hawk, he had built his career on attacking "big government" spending in the New Deal. His policies included the introduction of federal controls on the prices of oil and gas, health and safety legislation in the workplace and the establishment of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

Followers of Keynes (of different hues) look back on the post-war period to prove the validity of his ideas, yet they fail to explain why this period of unprecedented growth gave way to capitalist crisis in the mid 1970s. By the late 1960s growing capitalist competition between the US on the one hand and the rebuilt capitalist economies of Germany and Japan on the other, and the existence of a powerful workers' movement that played a role in defending workers' wages and conditions, resulted in falling profit rates and a profit squeeze for the system. Capitalist investment dried up resulting in a period of "stagflation" – combining inflation, which saw wages undermined by skyrocketing prices, and stagnating growth – throughout much of the 1970s and early 1980s.

The profitability and profit rates of the system could only be restored by attacking the share of wealth in society going to labour, in favour of capital. This meant slashing wages and the public investment that funded the "social wage" of the working class, necessitating a full-frontal attack on the power of the organised working class.

The rise and decline of neoliberalism

Just as Keynes' ideas gained currency amongst the capitalist establishment in response to the crisis of the 1930s, the crisis of the 1970s -- marking the end of the post-war boom -- persuaded the capitalists to discard Keynesianism in favour of policies known as "monetarism" or "neoliberalism". Leading advocates of these ideas included Milton Friedman, and his followers in the Chicago School, and the initial laboratory to test their ideas was Chile, after the CIA-backed overthrow of the leftist government of Salvador Allende, and the establishment of the dictatorship under Augusto Pinochet. The most prominent figureheads and crusaders for neoliberalism in the advanced capitalist countries were the regimes of



Miners Strike: Thatcher regime was determined to break the power of the organised working class

Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. Central to their project was waging war on the organised working class, most notably in the Air Traffic Controllers Strike in the US (1981) and the Miners Strike in Britain (1984-1985).

The policies of neoliberalism involved privatising public services, cutting social expenditure, deregulating financial markets, abolishing capital controls and attacking wages and conditions in the workplace. In essence it meant that hard won constraints on the ability of bosses to mercilessly exploit the working class were shelved. In place of Keynesian deficit spending, a tight reign was to be kept on the budgets of capitalist states (although in the case of the US this has never been adhered to). The European Union, which has been a key driver of neoliberalism has ensured that all EU states have a regime of austerity written into law, by introducing strict rules regarding budget deficits and national debt, preventing them from exceeding 3% and 60% of GDP respectively. These policies were harshly enforced in the context of the Eurozone crisis of the last decade, most destructively in Greece.

A factor that strengthened neoliberal ideology was the collapse of the Stalinist regimes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in the period 1989-1991 as a result of the criminal mismanagement of the unelected and unaccountable bureaucracies that ruled these societies. State ownership and planning of the economy was presented as being inherently inefficient and would inevitably lead to a reduction in living standards. This was not only used to undermine the idea of socialism generally, but was also used to push privatisation of public services and a further deregulation of financial markets. This line of argument was embraced by the leaderships of the

mass organisations of the working class. In Britain “New Labour” under the leadership of Tony Blair ditched “clause four” of the party’s constitution that committed the party to nationalisation of the key sectors of the economy.

The implementation of neoliberal policies in capitalist countries has obviously not been uniform and the state still plays a crucial role in capitalist development, contrary to the mantra of “the hidden hand of the market”. Even under the Presidency of Ronald Reagan, the US witnessed a form of “militarised Keynesianism” with state expenditure on armaments growing massively.

In the 1990s and 2000s, after the collapse of its property bubble and the ensuing recession, successive governments in Japan, then the second largest economy in the world, implemented a series of large stimulus programmes involving massive investment in public infrastructure.

Stimulus measures were implemented in Europe and the US following the 2008-2009 crash, and states, via their central banks, have played a critical role in keeping the capitalist economy afloat through Quantitative Easing (QE) i.e. printing money and cutting interest rates to promote capitalist investment. None of these policies, in Japan or those implemented in the US or Europe, have helped overcome the structural weaknesses of capitalism today.

Reformist half-measures won't do

Fear of the working class in this epoch of economic, social and political instability means that Keynesian measures in the form of increased state intervention in the economy will see a return. The coronavirus crisis has already accelerated this trend. Such policies, however, do not constitute socialism, as argued by Bernie Sanders. Rather they are reforms implemented within the framework of the private ownership of industry and finance and the rule of private profit. Nevertheless, their implementation will puncture Thatcher’s mantra that “there is no alternative” to the existing economic order.

Keynes’ ideas will no doubt continue to be utilised by reformist trends that will emerge in new left and working-class movements. They will feel emboldened to do so given how much neoliberal capitalism has been ideologically undermined, even if the ruling class still pursues these policies at the behest of big business and the bankers. However, their programmes will come up against the reality that there is a real conflict of interest at the heart of this system, which means that the needs of the capitalist class and working-class majority cannot co-exist peacefully, no matter how “mixed” the economy becomes.



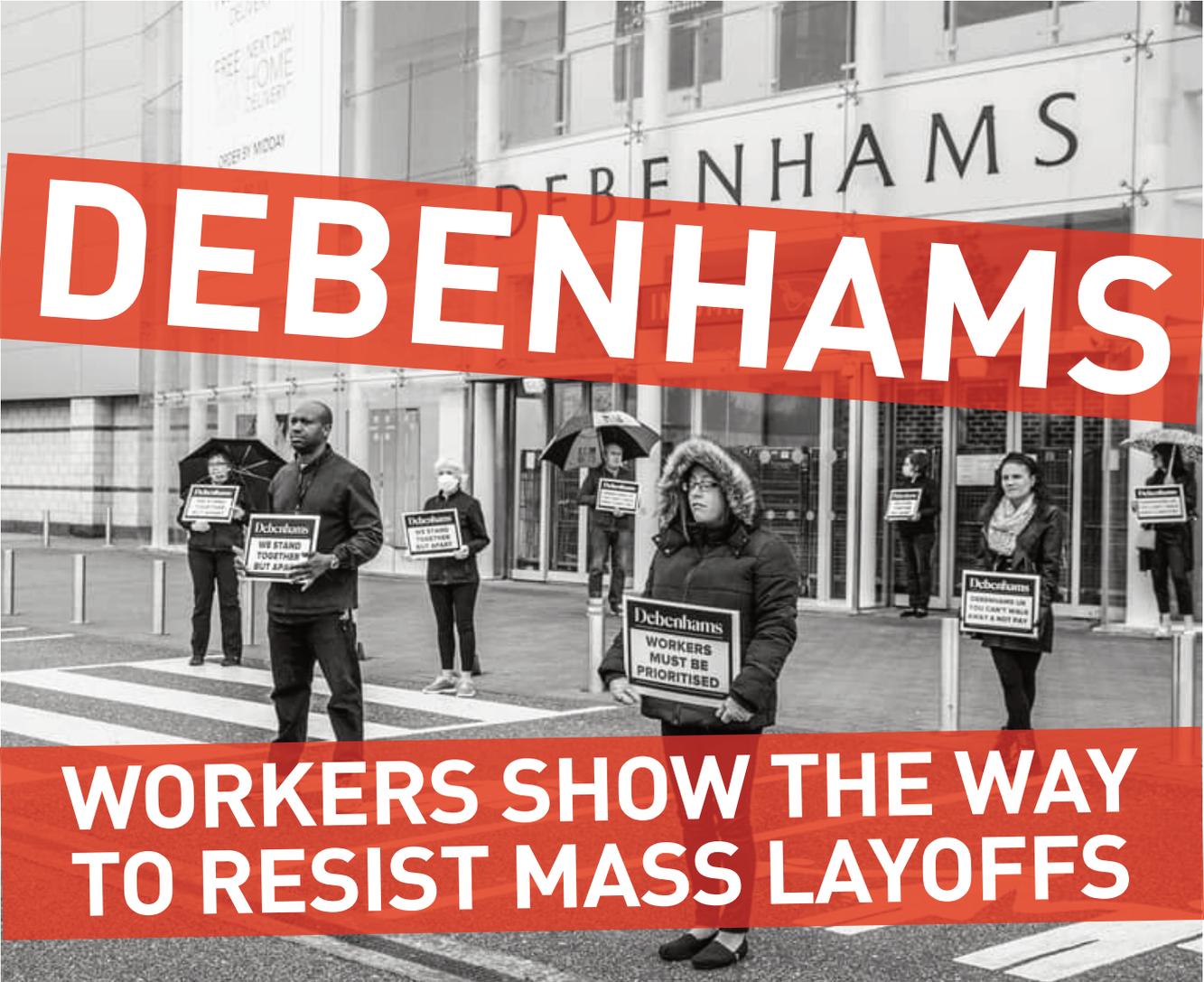
Keynesianism is an important influence on the reformist ideas of Bernie Sanders

Revolutionary socialists will of course fight for reforms such as state investment to create jobs, increasing wages for workers etc. advocated by reformists and Keynesians alike, but will put forward the need for broader radical change. Capitalism is based on crises, which are becoming increasingly severe in the 21st century, and the accumulation of capital and wealth by the billionaire class can only happen at the expense of our living standards, our health and our environment.

There is a real alternative, however: one that doesn't tinker with this or that aspect of the rapacious market system that's driven by short-term profit making, but instead replaces the drive to make profit with the drive to provide for people's needs; and replaces market anarchy with rational, democratic planning of the economy; that replaces the rule of a tiny elite with the rule of the immense majority. This can only be achieved by, in the words of Karl Marx, “expropriating the expropriators”. That is, to seize the wealth and resources that working people have created, and bring them into public ownership under their management and control. Doing so will lay the basis for an international socialist society where our planet is safeguarded and human beings will develop to their full capabilities and talents. ■

Notes

- 1 “Half of world’s workers ‘at immediate risk of losing livelihood due to coronavirus”, Guardian, 29 April 2020, www.theguardian.com
- 2 www.ictu.ie/press/diary/2010/10/12/building-an-alternative-vision-skidelsky-lecture/
- 3 Brendan Ogle, 2016, *From Bended Knee to a New Republic: How the Fight for Water is Changing Ireland*, Liffey Press, p.32
- 4 JM Keynes, “Open Letter to President Roosevelt”, 31 December 1933, *New York Times*



DEBENHAMS

WORKERS SHOW THE WAY TO RESIST MASS LAYOFFS

Debenhams shut down in April and left 2,000 workers in the lurch. In response, the workers have organised numerous protests outside stores, the high court and the Dáil, while adhering to social distancing, with the support and assistance of Socialist Party members. Since this article was written, 97% of the workers have voted to take industrial action, with a 76% turnout. RUTH COPPINGER looks at the significance of this battle.

Debenhams Ireland workers were sacked by email on Easter Thursday — just two days after the company had assured them their jobs were safe. Such callous indifference to workers — some with decades of service going back to Roches Stores and the launch of Debenhams into Ireland in 1996.

On April 6, Stefaan Vansteenkiste, Debenhams chief executive, had said the company would go into administration to protect its workers, so it could resume trading once government restrictions were lifted, stating:

“We are working with a group of highly supportive owners and lenders and anticipate that additional funding will be made available to bridge us through the current crisis period.” (Irish Times 6/4/20).

One of these ‘supportive owners’ and lenders is Bank of Ireland who part-own the Debenhams parent company, Celine Jersey TopCo Ltd, with what appears to be a vulture fund. Debenhams workers have rightly asked how a bank we bailed out a decade ago, and in which the state has a stake, could be allowed to pull the plug on Debenhams and dump the workers.

Debenhams a test case

As millions of workers worldwide are now finding, Covid-19 is an opportune time for millionaire shareholders to cut their losses, cast off their workforces and leave taxpayers to pay minimum redundancy. Debenhams is a test case and the response to it will be the benchmark for other firms. This week the Dalata / Clayton hotel chain announced thousands of redundancies. As did Aer Lingus and Ryanair. More will inevitably follow.

Retail Ireland has warned of 110,000 job losses in retail alone. Oasis, Warehouse and Laura Ashley followed Debenhams announcement. Rumours abound of other retail giants like Penneys and Next following

suit. As one Blanchardstown Debenhams worker said, if this happens, one third of Blanchardstown Centre could remain closed after Covid-19. Other shopping centres and high streets similarly.

Companies also see in the pandemic that newly-introduced emergency health regulations mitigate against an active response by workers and trade unions. But what they underestimated is the determination of workers to fight when their livelihoods are on the line.

Debenhams is a workforce unionised over many years, with a layer of strong shop stewards throughout the country. Their trade union, Mandate, has pledged to fight all out.

As well as fighting through their union, Debenhams workers independently contacted political representatives. A number contacted Socialist Party reps Mick Barry TD in Cork and myself in Dublin. This led to the idea of bringing workers from the different counties together to discuss through Zoom conference calls.

Workers fight back

Workers were determined that they would not allow deliberate use of the global pandemic as a way of shutting them down without any resistance. At the above meetings the workers discussed and decided to organise safe, socially-distanced protests at stores, as well as at Bank of Ireland.

The media was alerted the day before, which led to other Debenhams workers getting involved. Wednesday, 22 April would prove to be an unqualified success. The workers got their case out to the public, in their own voices and, through mainstream and social media, put Debenhams onto the agenda. Politicians were also forced to take note.

However, one Debenhams protest that day was cut short by Gardaí, citing the emergency powers given under amended health legislation. Workers at Henry Street, Dublin, were publicly read the act, prevented from talking to journalists, threatened with arrest and the Garda van, moved on and 'escorted' to public transport. Their shop steward had her name taken.

This harassment contrasted starkly with inaction against a crowd of far-right racists who refused to socially distance at a court hearing the same day and the workers won massive public support as a result. The Taoiseach also partook in another non-essential photo op with a large group of frontline workers. Same city, different rules.

Workers victimised

Garda actions dramatically backfired. Debenhams trended on Twitter. Even the Fianna Fáil leader — no friend to workers — stated next day that the protests had been conducted safely. A video of the events filmed by a Socialist Party member was viewed over 50,000 times.

The intervention by Gardaí was not accidental or random. Gardaí were waiting at the Henry Street store when workers arrived. This was a conscious decision by



Debenhams workers have organised protests from below

the state to send a warning message to other workers. Emergency public health legislation has been passed in states worldwide, with varying degrees of strictness. The vast majority of people see the laws as necessary to deal with coronavirus.

However, the Socialist Party warned that such legislation could also be used against workers in precisely the situation faced by Debenhams employees. Mick Barry was the only TD who explicitly registered his opposition to the legislation providing new Garda powers, specifically referring to their potential use against trade unionists and protests. When this legislation was discussed in the Dáil on 19 March he said:

“I support many of the provisions in the legislation but for the reasons I outlined [the attacks on democratic rights], I am opposed to the overall package.”

Debenhams protesters were the first serious test by workers of the laws. By challenging them carefully, in a disciplined way seen to be respectful of public health concerns, the workers have done other workers a real service in not allowing these laws deter them.

The following week in a second round of protests, Gardaí felt compelled to allow the Henry Street workers to have a protest, even if shortened. Workers held a banner saying “This is an essential protest”, as they’d been challenged on the non-essential journey clause.

Defending jobs

The workers had held a second day of successful protests at an increased number of locations — ten stores and two banks — again getting major publicity. By this time, through more discussion on the Zoom calls and, having highlighted the issue of statutory redundancy on the first day, workers were now anxious to place the emphasis on retaining their jobs, calling on the government to act to stop a ‘jobs massacre’ in the retail sector.

In a statement to media, two of the shop stewards protesting, Jane Crowe of Henry Street and Valerie Conlon of Patrick Street in Cork, said:

“The message of workers from these protests is that 2,000 jobs are on the line at Debenhams. That’s thousands of people and families reliant on our wages. The government would be better off stepping in now, to invest to keep people employed, rather than having to pay for thousands more people going onto social welfare.

“We believe many of the stores are profitable, as well as the online business. The government is putting billions in to keep people employed because of Covid 19. There are also EU funds available to prevent redundancies. We are asking all our political representatives to ask the government to take a stake here and invest to keep the company trading.”

They called on other retail workers to support them.

On Thursday 30 April, the liquidation of Debenhams went ahead. Workers were disappointed they had no voice in the proceedings, that the company was liquidated without anyone arguing for retention of their jobs.

Despite this, they resolved to press political parties and TDs for state intervention and investment to maintain employment at Debenhams. Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Greens are most likely to form a government. Will they support state investment and takeover of Debenhams, particularly FF who’ve tacitly given support?

One of the workers did a lot of independent research and wrote to the union and to political parties about this, pointing out that four-six stores are profitable, as is the online business and there is no justification for closing these. With government investment, these could return to trading as soon as restrictions are lifted in June. She pointed to funds established by the EU to stop redundancies, such as the €100 billion SURE (Support to mitigate Unemployment Risks in an

Emergency), as a fund the Irish government could call upon for Debenhams.

Public ownership to save jobs

There is a myth peddled that under capitalism private companies sink or swim on their own. Far from it. They are kept afloat with armbands and life jackets by the state.

In order to attract foreign direct investment and create jobs, IDA Ireland in one year alone, 2018, gave over €100 million in grants to some of the most profitable companies on the globe. For example, Abbot Laboratories received €14 million; top pharmaceutical companies received €30million; Intel and Microsoft received €1.9 and €2.8m respectively.

On top of this, they get sweetheart deals where they pay low — or no — tax, depriving the exchequer of funds. Thirteen companies paid less than 1% tax last year. We hear a lot about social welfare, but this corporate welfare costs a huge amount.

14,040 net new jobs were created in 2018 by the IDA. Just waving goodbye to 2,000 jobs at Debenhams (including the concession stores) can’t be accepted.

To maintain that number on welfare, to lose the taxes they pay will cost the state hugely — as well as the spinoff jobs related to the stores. Why would it then be unthinkable for the state to invest and take over the Debenhams stores in this context? A business plan could be drawn up to increase revenue, including to diversify. Roches, who own many of the Debenhams premises, and other landlords are also being called on to reduce rents.

In the last two months the state has had to implement policies it argued before were not possible or unconstitutional — propping up company wage bills, banning evictions, mortgage relief, taking over private hospitals (albeit at a disgracefully high rate). €6.5 billion has just been announced to support businesses.

It may be argued that Debenhams is losing too much money and has too much debt. For example €3.8 million is owed to Revenue — the government is proposing warehousing of taxes owed. How much of the debt is to Bank of Ireland or Debenhams in the UK?

The Socialist Party believes Debenhams, and other companies implementing mass redundancies, should be taken into public ownership, democratically run by the workers themselves and a new business plan drawn up. Workers are well aware of the trends in retail, growth in online shopping etc. and have the skills and ingenuity to work out a way forward.

The question of who will pay for the Covid-19 recession is posed. Will it once again be working class people or, this time, should it be the bankers and big business? The only way to prevent another decade of austerity and misery for working people is for the wealth, the banks and production to be taken into public ownership, under the control of the majority and for the economy to be rationally planned in our interests. ■



Mick Barry TD has used the Dáil to champion the Debenhams workers



THE LEFT & TRANSPHOBIA

BOGUS SCIENCE & BOGUS MARXISM

The question of fighting Transphobia, like all forms of oppression, is a crucial part in the struggle to end the rule of capitalism by a united movement of the working class. In recent years sections of the Left globally have unfortunately perpetuated transphobic attitudes and prejudices using pseudo-Marxist arguments to do so. CONOR PAYNE debunks these arguments and myths.

Trans People face oppression all around the world. In the US, trans women are more than four times more likely than cisgender women to be victims of murder and black trans women are seven times more likely to be murdered than the general population. In the UK, 2018-19 saw a 37% increase in hate crimes against trans people.¹ A study by UK-based LGBTQ+ group Stonewall found that one in four trans people had experienced homelessness at some point in their lives, while 12% of trans workers reported physical violence or harassment in the workplace in the last year.² In Ireland, a Transgender Equality Network Ireland survey found that 80% of respondents avoided at least some public places or situations due to fear of harassment

and 78% had thought about suicide at some point in their lives, with 40% having made at least one attempt.³

Violence, harassment and discrimination have been experienced by trans people for many years. But part of the context of these figures is a rise in the use of transphobic rhetoric and anti-trans legislation in a whole number of countries, in particular emanating from the resurgent populist right as well as sections of the establishment. Far right and right populist parties around the world rail against “gender ideology,” against the social recognition of the validity of Trans identities and lives. In the US, the Trump administration has moved to ban trans people from the military, to remove protections from discrimination for trans people in healthcare and to make it legal to discriminate against trans people in homeless shelters, among a raft of other measures. The US right has also pushed a series of “bathroom bills” at state or local level which seek to prevent trans people from using the bathroom which corresponds best to their gender. In Hungary, the increasingly authoritarian regime of Orban recently introduced a measure to erase the legal recognition of trans people as part of a bill allegedly aimed at fighting the Coronavirus!

Transphobic propaganda

In Britain, a widespread campaign of transphobic propaganda has emanated from the press and sections of the political establishment, particularly in response

to proposals to amend the Gender Recognition Act of 2004 to allow trans people to change their legally recognised gender via self-identification. The campaign has had an effect. The Tory government appears to have reversed their position on self-identification and are instead looking at new attacks on trans rights. Women and Equalities Minister, Liz Truss, indicated she was planning measures to ‘protect single-sex spaces;’ that is, to exclude trans people from using facilities which are designated to the gender they identify with, and to remove or restrict the right of trans people under 18 to medical treatment related to their transition.⁴ This treatment is often life saving for many young people. Obviously, these measures from Boris Johnson’s government are not grounded in concern for the rights of women, and certainly not in any scientific or medical best practice. They are a product of a campaign which mirrors the demonisation of many other minorities in society, presenting trans people as a dangerous threat.

Two examples give a good picture of the nature of the lies and distortions which are being spread. Starting in 2017, multiple British papers including *The Star*, *Telegraph*, *The Sun* and *The Mirror* published stories which suggested that the notorious child murderer Ian Huntley was seeking to be legally recognised as a woman, implicitly making a point about the alleged dangers of self-identification. It turns out that this story was completely untrue forcing ‘clarifications’ to be printed some two years later. On April 12, former Tory minister Rory Stewart falsely claimed, “When I was Prisons Minister, we had situations of male prisoners self-identifying as females then raping staff in prison. So I think if somebody is biologically male, particularly in an environment like a prison, we shouldn’t allow that to happen.”⁵ Again, *The Sun* ran with this headline. The truth, a statement from the Prison Service confirming “We have no record of this happening” was buried in the text of the article.

The themes of this sensationalism are clear: trans people are predators, a threat to women, their identities are not to be trusted. It wasn’t very long ago that such

claims were being regularly made in the capitalist press about gay people. The difference is that this campaign unfortunately does not emanate solely from the conservative right but from also from the liberal establishment, some self-described feminists and even sections of the left.

Sections of trade union leaders, labour party activists and some left organisations have raised objections to the right to self-identification and more generally to the fight for trans liberation. The depth of the rot was exposed in the publication in the *Morning Star*, supported by some trade unions and associated with the Communist Party of Britain (CPB), of a particularly vile transphobic and dehumanising cartoon, comparing trans people to crocodiles. This caused justified outrage and the *Morning Star* ultimately issued an apology headlined, “We failed in our duty to equality and liberation”⁶ and promising to review their past coverage of the issue. And that’s precisely the point — the cartoon didn’t fall from the sky. It reflected years of articles in the *Morning Star* and from other parts of the left arguing that trans rights posed a threat to women’s rights and this is in turn reflected in other parts of the Left. A serious review would involve a complete rejection of this approach in favour of one rooted in opposition to all oppression and confident in the capacity for solidarity among all working class people and the oppressed.

The ‘left’ case against trans rights

The ‘progressive’ opponents of trans rights generally present the issue as one of a ‘clash of rights’ between trans people and women, whose access to separate spaces is under threat — of course this argument takes as its starting point that trans women are not genuinely women. They also argue that trans identities reinforce gender stereotypes and undermine our ability to understand and oppose women’s oppression. While usually couched in claims to oppose discrimination against trans people, they fundamentally embrace the same logic as the transphobic right and draw many of the same conclusions. For example, Woman’s Place UK claims to be rooted in socialist and labour traditions and claims prominent trade union activists among its leading members. But what do they advocate? Speaking on their behalf, Lucy Masoud makes it clear that they want the law:

“tightened up and...enforced; enforced to ensure that female-only spaces and services in this country are protected. Business and organisations should face fines or legal action if they knowingly, and deliberately flout the law.”

These ‘female-only spaces’ include ‘toilets, health provision accommodation, prisons, sports, sexual and domestic violence services’.⁷ This is essentially a legal ban on trans women using women’s toilets and a whole range of other services — a variant of a Trumpian bathroom bill cloaked in feminist and socialist rhetoric.



Currently in Britain, to change their gender on their birth certificate, a person must have a diagnosis of gender dysphoria and to have lived as their preferred gender for two years. These restrictions cause real issues for the lives of trans people. The legal recognition of your gender has both practical and symbolic significance. Birth certificates are an important legal document often requested when applying for all kinds of services or interacting with the state. A birth certificate which doesn't match with someone's lived gender or with other identification they have puts trans people at risk of being forcibly outed during these interactions, or causing other obstacles and problems.

While some trans people experience gender dysphoria, others do not and this medicalised process requiring people to receive a psychological diagnosis before gaining legal recognition flies in the face of current research and understanding of trans identities. Access to trans healthcare is also very limited for those who cannot afford private healthcare- in Ireland you will wait three plus years. Self-identification means simply that this process is replaced with a legal declaration of one's preferred gender. This has existed in the south of Ireland since 2015, albeit with important limitations such as the absence of any form of recognition of non-binary people. Despite the apocalyptic claims dominating the debate in Britain, it has not caused any issues for the rights of women or anyone else. The idea that giving trans people the legal right to use facilities in line with their gender would lead to dangers for women is not backed up by research. For example, one study from Massachusetts looked at localities which had trans inclusive laws and those that did not and found no difference in reports of assaults or other crimes in public bathrooms and changing rooms.⁸

Violence against women is endemic in society — but trans women are overwhelmingly more likely to be its victims than perpetrators. The most pertinent concern about violence in this debate is the threat of violence against trans women who would be forced to use male toilets, be detained in male prisons etc. In 2015, Vicky Thompson was found dead from suicide after being held in a male prison and being subject to transphobic harassment.⁹

Reinforcing gender stereotypes?

Another important claim of transphobic campaigners is that trans identities are predicated on gender stereotypes and that young people are "pressured" to adopt a trans identity if they don't conform to stereotypical behaviour for boys or girls. This is completely baseless, and ignores the very real danger to young trans people when their identities are denied. Studies demonstrate both that the gender identities of trans children are as strong and consistent as those of cis children¹⁰ and that young trans people who undergo hormone treatments have much more positive outcomes as a result.¹¹

Of course, the same people making this argument will also question the authenticity of trans people who they believe don't look or act enough like the gender they identify with. Gender stereotyping and rigid gender roles are a huge part of our society and the point should never be to criticise individuals, whether trans or cis, if they reflect them in some way in their lives. At the same time, there is precisely a growing attempt to reject these false binaries and this is part of what is fuelling the support for trans liberation among young people and in the global women's movement. The (fairly obvious) truth is that attacking trans rights only serves to reinforce gender stereotypes, not to undermine them in any way and that this will impact cis women also.

A stark illustration can be found in the guidelines published by 'Fair Play for Women' for organisations on how to provide 'female-only' changing rooms:

"in order to uphold your lawful policy of providing women with a female-only changing room it may sometimes be necessary for staff to deny access to a male person. We instinctively know who's male and female simply by looking which makes it quick and easy for staff to spot if a male person enters a female changing room...admission to female-only changing rooms should be based first on a visual assessment of someone's sex, followed by a request to see a female birth certificate in circumstances where staff reasonably suspects that the person was born male".¹²

These are incredible suggestions which amount to gender policing. The impact on the rights and safety of trans people is obvious but it would also have much wider implications. Most people don't carry their birth certificates around with them and its inconceivable that if this approach were widely implemented it wouldn't impact on intersex people and cis women who don't fit stereotypical standards of how women look!

Bogus Marxism

Where left and feminist organisations argue these ideas its worth looking at the political and theoretical roots. Many position their opposition as being a rejection of postmodern 'identity politics,' but in reality their argumentation reproduces a version of identity politics. For Marxists, the starting point is the need to stand against all forms of oppression, to support the struggles of oppressed groups and to seek to link them in the context of a united working class and socialist movement. A key part of this is understanding the roots of different forms of oppression in class and capitalist society and therefore the potential to fundamentally challenge them.

Capitalism relies on the oppression of women, a gendered division of labour, and the unpaid domestic labour mainly of women within the structure of the nuclear family. It therefore depends on an ideology of gender stereotypes and roles. Trans people as well as other LGBTQ+ people by their existence undermine this ideology and therefore face oppression in capitalist society. Where the emphasis is put on the conflicting



Over 1,000 attended the first Trans Pride in Dublin in 2018.

rights or aspiration of different groups, without a perspective for real unity and solidarity, it tends to undermine this and instead point to a battle for the limited rights and resources which capitalist society is willing to dole out.

In the writings of those leftists who oppose the fight for trans liberation, we see this narrative; a conflict between the rights of women and those of trans people and the conclusion that ultimately the rights of trans people must therefore be limited. Kiri Tunks of the National Union of Teachers writes that allowing trans women to use women's services will "mean that services already under attack from austerity politics will be further hampered in their ability to deliver for the people they were created to serve."¹³ While this is dubious given the relatively small percentage of the population who are trans women, it's notable that there is no perspective here for fighting for better resourced services for all, only fighting over ever reducing crumbs. This has nothing in common with a socialist approach, but does have parallels to the rhetoric of the right which pits, for example, immigrants against non-immigrant workers in a competition for resources. The left should never accept this approach; it should place its confidence in a united fight against austerity policies which impact the services we all rely on.

Writing in the *Morning Star*, Mary Davis of the Communist Party of Britain argues that women face "oppression", while trans people only face "discrimination". By her account, the difference is that:

"oppression, unlike discrimination, is linked materially to the process of class exploitation by paying women much less than men, thus serving capitalism's profit motive."¹⁴

Therefore "challenging the specific discrimination faced by trans people is not served by undermining resistance to the centuries-old oppression of women as a biological sex." This is very strange. Clearly "discrimination" isn't sufficient to describe the brutal violence against trans people around the world, nor the targeting of trans people by right-wing regimes and forces, or the economic disadvantage of trans people.

This definition would also seem to suggest that homophobia, anti-semitism, which flow from capitalist society but which don't have a direct link to the profit motive cannot be "oppression". Most importantly, it completely misses that women's oppression and LGBTQ+ oppression are linked; that the ideology of gender roles and stereotypes which serve to justify and perpetuate women's oppression lead inexorably to the targeting of LGBTQ+ people, including trans people whose existence represents a defiance of those norms. Sexism, homophobia and transphobia are all intrinsic to capitalist society and there is a common interest for all those who want to fight them and to unite.

Elaine Graham-Leigh of Counterfire, another left group which gives succour to the arguments of the transphobic right, attempts to ground their position in a Marxist understanding of women's oppression and to paint the fight for trans rights as wholesale "postmodern identity politics."¹⁵ A Marxist analysis identifies the origins of women's oppression in the development of class society. Early human societies did not produce a surplus of wealth, relied on the contribution of each group member to survive and neither had class division nor the oppression of women. With the development of agriculture, an economic surplus existed which created the specialisation of labour, a minority which was freed

from the day to day toil of physical labour and appropriated the surplus as its own. This new ruling class needed to be able to perpetuate itself by passing on its property and privileges.

This was the basis for the creation of the family and the subjugation of women whose sexuality needed to be controlled to enable inheritance via the male line. Therefore the oppression of women flows from specific historic conditions and can also be abolished by eliminating those conditions. This idea stands in opposition to the main framework of bourgeois feminism which often sees men at all levels of society as collectively oppressing all women, and therefore can point to no fundamental way out of oppression, only to ameliorate it within the existing system.

For Elaine Graham-Leigh recognising trans women as women and trans men as men is incompatible with this analysis because:

“In this view, women, for example, are not oppressed because of any relation to their female sex, but because and to the extent that they identify as women and signify this through their performance of femininity. The reality of the sex of their bodies is as unimportant as all material reality.”

She also suggests that accepting trans identities involves “the damaging inference that women who don’t like it could just identify as men, or, even worse, that the fact that they don’t like it shows that they must really be men.”

A Marxist view of women’s oppression

Of course, you can’t identify out of your oppression and given the oppression faced by trans people it’s ludicrous to suggest that anyone would adopt a trans identity in order to do so! It is however possible to oppress people by denying them the right to identify as they wish. This is precisely because gender is a material social reality.

To read this account, you would think that trans identities are some recent postmodern invention. Of course, throughout history and in a variety of different human societies there have been trans people; people who didn’t identify with the gender assigned to them or wished to live outside the gender binary altogether. This language and the frameworks used to understand this has changed of course, as it has with many other identities. The central issue then is where we stand on the rights of trans people, and the right to self-identify means the right to exist in society in the way which is most authentic to you, rather than be forced into the rigid gender roles which capitalist society seeks to impose.

There is no reason for a socialist defence of trans rights to reject a materialist understanding of women’s



oppression. We do have to understand how women’s oppression in capitalist society functions today, not just how it emerged historically. Its purpose is not solely to facilitate the inheritance of property but much more. The unpaid labour of women, worth \$10.9 trillion a year, reproducing the next generation of workers within the nuclear family, the profits which accrue from low pay in sections of the workforce dominated by women and as a means of social and ideological control. All this gives rise to misogyny as a real material force in society which can affect all women. Just as not all cis women will experience pregnancy and the forms of oppression which relate to it, neither will trans women, but they will unfortunately experience many aspects of women oppression including potentially gender-based violence and higher levels of low pay and poverty and in many cases experience these more intensely as a particularly marginalised group of women.¹⁶

Graham-Leigh makes some correct criticisms of neo-liberal identity politics, in particular its hostility to the idea of united struggle. She says this:

“this view of oppression as being only something which the oppressed themselves can fight buttresses the neo-liberal argument that society is irrelevant...It is only if, on the other hand, we perceive the importance of social, communal bonds, that we can fight against oppression to which we are not ourselves subject but which we don’t want to exist in our society.”

While oppressed people do obviously have a unique insight into their own oppression and their own struggles and demands are key, we agree that an effective movement fighting to win has to have a perspective for building a united struggle which takes in the whole working class. This also involves the wider working class movement being willing to take up the struggles and demands of all oppressed groups. Having

made this point, however, she later completely contradicts herself as regards the involvement of trans people in the movement against gender-based oppression:

“Since we live in a society in which women are still at risk of male violence and systemic oppression, we need to be able to organise just with other women when we require it.”

So, here we see exactly the same outlook: it's impossible for trans people to be fully integrated into the women's movement and indeed they are implicitly described as a potential source of “male violence and systemic oppression”. The reason Graham-Leigh contradicts herself so is that she shares much common ground with identity politics. Her practical approach is grounded not in a Marxist analysis of women's oppression but in ‘patriarchy theory’ which views sexism as a collective enterprise of ‘men’ against ‘women’, and therefore feels the need to police the boundaries of gender identity.

Conclusion

We should not just engage in abstractions but base ourselves on real experiences. In recent years, we have seen the emergence of a new global women's movement, fighting anti-abortion laws, gender-based violence and femicide, the gender pay gap and many other manifestations of sexist oppression. This movement has been an important part of the radicalisation of a new generation of young women and trans people and has played an important role in re-introducing important methods of working class struggle to those who grew up at the height of neo-liberal ideological dominance. Particularly notable has been the use of the method of the strike in the Spanish state, Switzerland and elsewhere. Has the experience of this movement been one of mistrust and division around the involvement of trans and non-binary people? In fact, the solidarity has been instinctive and young people generally have the most open attitudes to trans rights in society.

In Ireland, the recent steps forward in terms of gender recognition and the defeat of the 8th amendment have both been part of the same process of the rejection of the conservative status quo. Similarly, the wave of transphobic incitement in Britain does not herald a new dawn for women's rights but poses the threat of a reactionary offensive against them. While Graham-Leigh's statement that “there is no natural unity among the oppressed” has an element of truth, we should be clear the source of division in the working class is capitalism and its ideology and that the outbreak of struggle tends to break down the barriers that exist because of the necessity of unity and solidarity.

In the context of a relatively low level of struggle, the success of right populism, and the inability of the Corbyn movement, despite its positives, to develop a

mass political alternative at this stage, there is a danger of a capitulation to backward and socially conservative ideas among a layer in the left and labour movement in Britain. This is not helped by the continued influence of Stalinism in sections of the trade unions and Labour Party left and a layer of left-wing young people, which has always tended to adapt to conservative prejudices and understate the capacity of working class struggle to overcome them. The *Morning Star* recently carried an article about the virtues of ‘progressive patriotism’, a line which was also used by Left Labour leadership candidate Rebecca Long-Bailey.¹⁷ It's important to be sensitive to people's national aspirations and identities but it's another thing altogether to describe patriotism as “necessary to achieving socialism”!

You will never build a united movement capable of taking on and defeating capitalism without challenging in a skillful way the prejudices which exist in society and standing clearly for the rights and aspirations of all oppressed people. This is how division can be overcome and capitalist ideology decisively undermined. The need for an alternative to the rotten capitalist system has never been clearer and in the coming years more and more workers and young people will search for an alternative and can find it in the ideas of socialism and Marxism. In that context, transphobia or equivocation in defence of any oppressed people will only serve to repel, disorientate and divide. To meet the challenge, we need a renewed confidence in working class solidarity and human liberation. ■

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One hundred years ago workers downed tools and took over their workplaces and towns. What began as a hunger strike in prison grew into a general strike against British Imperialism that pointed in the direction of socialism and workers' power. MANUS LENIHAN gives an account of these colossal events.

One hundred years ago revolution was sweeping across Ireland and the world. Beginning with Russia in 1917, the working class and poor people mounted a global challenge to capitalism and imperialism. In Europe, empires and ancient monarchies collapsed into dust, and workers' councils governed whole cities and states, heralding a new era of socialist revolution. In Asia and Africa, oppressed peoples rose up to challenge imperialism. In North America, strikes led to working-class takeovers of whole cities, and gun battles raged in the coal-mining areas.

In the south of Ireland, after the 1916 Rising, a growing mood for independence was intertwined with a desire for socialism and a "Workers' Republic." A previously obscure fringe party called Sinn Féin grew

to a powerful mass organisation in a few short years. Sinn Féin stood up against British imperialism but envisaged an independent capitalist Ireland. The British ruling class responded with violent repression, which stepped up a gear in 1920.

The nightmare scenario of the British ruling class was socialist revolution in Ireland, spreading inevitably to Britain. After the 1919 engineering strike in Belfast, the Viceroy Lord French was terrified of the potential for socialist and class politics to unite Protestant and Catholic workers.¹ Sinn Féin was equalled, and for a period surpassed, by the trade union movement, especially the militant Irish Transport and General Workers' Union (ITGWU), which grew from 5,000 to 120,000 members between 1916 and 1920. On the back of awesome struggles such as the anti-conscription general strike and the Limerick Soviet, "There was a growing working-class culture in 1920 which openly identified with the Red Flag and took inspiration from the Russian Revolution."² This aroused horror not only on the part of the British authorities, but also Sinn Féin and its armed wing, the Irish Republican Army (IRA).

Hunger Strike

By April, raids and police informers have filled the cells of Mountjoy. The Black and Tans, paramilitaries

recruited to fill the thinning ranks of the police, begin a sadistic rampage across Ireland. There are 4,000 military raids in February alone³ and the blows landed on labour as much as on Sinn Féin. Every other week the authorities confiscated or sabotaged the *Watchword of Labour*, in whose pages reports on the Russian Revolution jostled for space with accounts of farm labourers' victories in small Irish towns. Union offices were ransacked, meetings were broken up and trade union officials were interned without trial.

In April, prisoners began to strike back, supported by huge numbers on the outside. From the 11th, crowds heaved against a line of soldiers outside Mountjoy Prison. Inside, behind the bayonets and barbed wire, ninety men were on hunger strike. They were behind bars for unlawful assembly, possession of arms, drilling and "making seditious speeches;" half were convicted and half were internees. As well as refusing to eat, they had tunnelled through cell walls and smashed up every stick of furniture. The strike was as much a socialist initiative as a republican one: among the strikers, trade union militants were at least a "considerable proportion" or possibly even "the greater party." Every night the starving men sang songs, and every night they finished with "The Red Flag."⁴

Jack Hedley

Among the leaders of the hunger strike was someone who embodies the working-class and internationalist politics of the time: Jack Hedley, alias Sean O'Hagan. An English socialist drafted into the British navy, Hedley jumped ship in Belfast in 1918. He was baited by the press and by sectarian bigots as a result of his activity during the historic January 1919⁷ Engineering Strike in Belfast, also known as the "Belfast Soviet": "The black north can take care of itself anyway, without either Larkins or O'Hagans or Russian jews."⁵ That summer he was arrested with books by Marx and Lenin in his pockets, and jailed for "a speech approving the Russian soviet system, and advocating its adoption in this country."⁶

He was one of the "Red-Socialists" identified by the press as the organisers of a 100,000-strong march from Donegall Place to Ormeau Park in Belfast on May Day 1919. His comrades include Sean Dowling, who was a close comrade of James Connolly and the "philosophical begetter" and a leader of the Limerick Soviet.⁸ In 1920-22 Hedley and his comrades went on to lead the "Munster Soviets", which saw workplaces and towns occupied by workers across the province. Hedley and the other socialist prisoners wanted to strike for unconditional release, but the republicans successfully argued for the more limited demand of prisoner-of-war status.⁹

Protests on a knife-edge

The prison medical officer warned that the men were soon going to start dropping dead among Hedley and his fellow hunger strikers. The crowds outside the gate

swelled to tens of thousands of men and women, trampling barricades, defying tanks. The soldiers fired volleys over their heads. A fighter plane swooped down and flew "along a broad street below the eaves of the houses." The idea of machine-gunning the crowd from the air had been considered.¹⁰ Some of the protestors had revolvers in their pockets and their task was simple: if the "Tommys" (British soldiers) would shoot, they would shoot back. The confrontation was on a knife-edge. In Amritsar, in Punjab in India, one year ago almost to the day, British troops gunned down 400 peaceful protestors. Was that bloodshed about to be repeated? Or perhaps the prison is about to be stormed by the masses like a 20th century Bastille.

Socialists were in the crowd, appealing to the soldiers not to fire. The "Tommys," privates and NCOs, were in general more sympathetic than the officers, Black and Tans or Auxiliaries. Working-class British soldiers – "our fellow trade unionists in khaki"¹¹ – were aware of colossal strikes going on in Britain, involving their friends and neighbours. The year previously, mutinies broke out in the British army, culminating in the creation of a soldiers' soviet of Calais. If it came down to it, the troops might have refused to fire.

But there were restraining influences on the other side. Sean O'Mahony, a Sinn Féin TD and businessman, organised a cordon of priests to push the crowd back. The role of Sinn Féin and the Catholic Church in these events is to urge restraint and to dampen down the struggle.

The General Strike

It was the organised working class that liberated the prisoners, broke the barricade and ended the hunger strike. On 12 April the Irish Trades Union Congress executive issued the call for an indefinite general strike for the unconditional release of the hunger strikers. The word went out in the evening papers, by telegram and on the mail trains.

In Dublin, rail workers at Broadstone and Inchicore downed tools and marched on Mountjoy. Work stopped in every part of the city. For the next three days, large parts of Ireland experienced scenes you would expect to see only in a socialist revolution. Workers' councils take over many towns, "formed not on a local but on a class basis."¹² Roving pickets with bricks and sticks kept businesses closed. Factories, offices, schools and shops were shut, marts and fairs were dispersed. Stocks of food and coal were seized and their distribution was overseen by workers. Motor vehicles, then a rare commodity only owned by businesses and the affluent, were halted. Workers' councils appointed police forces and issued permits.

Incredible reports came in from a long list of towns. In Kilmallock, Co Limerick: "At one table sat a school teacher dispensing bread permits, at another a trade union official controlling the flour supply – at a third a railwayman controlling coal, at a fourth a creamery clerk distributing butter tickets... all working

smoothly.”¹³ Waterford, meanwhile, was “taken over by a Soviet Commissar [a railway worker] and three associates. The Sinn Féin mayor abdicated. For two days [...] the city was in the hands of these men.” The workers were benevolent conquerors: in Cavan, says a laconic report, “one RIC man attempted hold up of parade with baton; life spared on recommendation of leaders.”¹⁴

“A remarkable feature [...] is the ever-present nature of the word Soviet.”¹⁵ Along with phrases like “Bolshevik” “Red Guard” and even “Commissar,” this showed the internationalist outlook and socialist politics of the strikers. For a great number of the strikers, this mass action was part of a global struggle not just against imperialism but against capitalism.

“Staggering blow” to imperialism

The main imperial authorities on the ground in Ireland were Lord French and Commander-in-Chief Macreedy. On 13 April the British cabinet instructed them to concede prisoner-of-war status to the hunger strikers. This demand was unthinkable for the British ruling class just a few days before that; now it became unthinkable for the hunger strikers. They rejected it.

French and Macreedy were terrified by the general strike, and the cabinet in London, to save itself from humiliation, had washed its hands of the matter. French and Macreedy decide to free the prisoners. They fumble for a fig leaf to cover their shame, and offer to release the prisoners “on parole.” But again the prisoners refused the deal. They would not sign parole papers. The authorities were forced to release them unconditionally – anything, to put an end to the strike. Maintaining their stiff upper lip to the very end, the authorities read “parole conditions” out loud to their former prisoners as they walked out. It was Tory leader Andrew Bonar Law who teared away the last shred of dignity from the proceedings, pointing out that half of the hunger strikers were never in any case entitled to parole!¹⁶ The reality was that the prisoners have not been “paroled” but liberated by mass action.

This moment was a decisive turning-point in the struggle against imperialism. The morale of their forces is devastated and many of their gains since January wiped out. With former prisoners at large, the touts who put them behind bars were “virtually driven off the streets.” Historian Charles Townsend describes it as a “staggering blow.”¹⁷ The armed power of the state was countered by united working-class action, and the newspapers were full of reports of soviets; it was all a very dramatic indication of the potential for socialist revolution. This accelerated the turn of the British ruling class from simple repression to a compromise with Sinn Féin and unionism in the form of the “divide and rule” strategy of partition.

Lessons

The General Strike of April 1920 represented a victory of masses of organised workers, both women and men, not of a few politicians, or even of guerrilla flying

columns. It hammered home again the lesson that, in the words of James Connolly, “only the Irish working class remain as the incorruptible inheritors of the fight for freedom in Ireland.”¹⁸ The strike demonstrated workers’ ability to shut down industry, services and transport. (Later that year, underscoring the point, transport workers began their refusal to carry British troops and munitions). It also showed, at every stage, that workers were willing to go further and sacrifice more in the struggle.

Crucially, the labour movement could have put forward a programme to appeal to Protestant as well as Catholic workers. The reactionary politics of unionist politicians like Edward Carson and James Craig faced a stiff challenge from socialists. When Labour candidates won 12 out of 60 seats in the January 1920 local elections in Belfast, a Dáil document described the vote as “not Carsonite but clearly internationalist.”¹⁹ The vision of Sinn Féin, on the other hand, based on tariffs and likely to be dominated by the Catholic Church, held no attraction to Protestant workers.

Tragically the key labour leaders, while revolutionary in words, were conservative in deeds. Their approach throughout the period was to support Sinn Féin, never to make any serious challenge to them. Had the workers’ movement acted as an independent force with its own programme, putting its own stamp on events, not only could Protestant workers have been won over, but “there was every danger that this class war might be carried into the ranks of the republican army itself”²⁰ due to the class character of the rank-and-file of the IRA and broader Republican movement. On the basis of a worker-led, secular and anti-sectarian movement for socialism and against imperialism, the bloody tragedy of partition and civil war could have been averted.



Crowds outside Mountjoy Jail cheering news of the granting of political status to the hunger-strikers

Role of republicanism

In the wake of the 1920 General Strike the unionist Irish Times taunted republicans: “A continuation of the fight which ended yesterday might have witnessed the establishment of soviets of working men in all the ports of Ireland.” The message to Sinn Féin was: this is just as much of a problem for you as it is for us; “Sinn Féin as a body is anti-socialist... They are beginning to appreciate – now that it has disappeared – the merits of the Pax Britannica [British rule in Ireland].”²¹ There was no word of a lie. Sinn Féin and the IRA were fundamentally hostile to working-class struggles. Some elements of Sinn Féin and the IRA sometimes played a role in struggles or voiced radical phrases, but that doesn’t change the general picture. Later the anti-treaty republicans offered nothing fundamentally different, and proved hostile to independent working-class action. Various strikes and land struggles of 1920 were described by Sinn Féin’s Ministry of Home Affairs as “a grave menace to the Republic.”²²

Such a total and unqualified victory as the April 1920 General Strike is a rare thing to find in the history books. Unfortunately, accounts of it in history books are often just as hard to find. These events, and the stories of individuals like Jack Hedley, have been saved from oblivion thanks to the work of labour and socialist historians.

Hedley, Sean Dowling and their comrades founded the Revolutionary Socialist Party in 1919. Indicating the excitement with which it was received, it drew 500 people to one meeting in Belfast. Under pressure of titanic events and the blows of state repression, the RSP did not survive, but it shows the potential that existed. Even a small party, provided it was built and tempered in advance, could have grown and played a decisive role, unleashing the full potential of the workers’ movement. The Syndicalist politics of many workers’ leaders of the time meant they may have failed to draw out the full lessons of the Russian Revolution – on the need for a revolutionary party, without which a revolutionary movement, no matter how powerful, will “dissipate like steam not enclosed in a piston-box.”²³

That the ingredients for such a party did in fact exist is proved by the role played by workers’ leaders – cadres – like Hedley and Dowling and their comrades. Their stories draw together elements which may seem disparate at first glance. April 1920 found Hedley starving in the cells of Mountjoy while outside, workers seized control of town after town; a red thread connects this moment to James Connolly, to the Russian Revolution, to the great strikes of 1919 in Belfast and Limerick and to the workplace soviets in Munster with their great slogan, “We make bread not profits.” This connecting thread is working-class struggle and socialist revolution, a political



Mountjoy hunger strikers April 1920

programme best summed up in a report from the West of Ireland during the General Strike of April 1920:

“Well, the Workers’ Council is formed in Galway, and it’s here to stay. God speed the day when such Councils shall be established all over Erin and the world, control the natural resources of the country, the means of production and distribution, run them as the worker knows how to run them, for the good and welfare of the whole community and not for the profits of a few bloated parasites.”²⁴

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HOW WE CAN ORGANISE TO WIN AN ALTERNATIVE TO THE LEAVING CERT

BY MYRIAM POIZAT

All over the world, frontline and essential workers are being left with very little or no PPE, and non-essential workers are being forced back into work in dangerous circumstances in the name of capitalists' profits. At the same time, Jeff Bezos (the owner of Amazon and richest man in the world) is on track to become a trillionaire by 2026. This shows that while millions are suffering from a pandemic, losing from their jobs to their lives, capitalists and governments protecting them are unashamedly making money out of it. But those inequalities, exacerbated by the pandemic, have pushed workers and young people into taking actions to protect and extend their rights.

How #CancelTheLeavingCert was won

Official records will show that the cancellation of the 2020 Leaving Cert exams was only due to logistical problems related to organising state exams in a pandemic. There is no doubt that the government was going to have to face the difficult realities of ensuring PPE & social distancing in the exam halls as well as recruiting sufficient extra volunteers. Yet, the government was always going to have to face these obstacles, so why did they only cancel the Leaving Cert when they did? Another significant factor in this decision was the pressure that students in the main,

but also parents and teachers behind them, put on the government — raising their voices about both the loss of school time and the inhumane decision of proceeding with state exams in a pandemic as heavy strains on the mental health of young people.

It was clear from the beginning of the pandemic that the government was not willing to cancel the exams. Their complete disregard for young people's well-being and their stubborn insistence that the Leaving Cert exams had to take place regardless of the impact it could have on young people, left students in situations of uncertainty and severe anxiety for over two months. The mental health crisis that could have emerged from holding the Leaving Cert exams is unspeakable.

It is therefore a coming together of the logistical problems (which were becoming greater as the government moved closer to the exams) and the student opposition that played a key role in securing the cancellation of the exams which threatened the mental health, health and safety of young people. The student opposition, which started organising, and was going to grow more (with the increasing mental health crisis and the prospect of doing exams kitted out in PPE, including gloves and face masks) clearly made the government fearful of what the coming weeks might have brought. Not only did the Leaving class of 2020 speak out online and organised a poll of nearly

25,000 students which showed 79% of students in favour of the cancellation of the exams, but they also started organising actively — with 2,500 attending an online protest rally organised by Mick Barry TD, Socialist Students and the Socialist Party and 1,500 signing up to join a campaign initiated at the rally to increase mass pressure on the government. The first action of the campaign following the rally was very significant and propelled #cancelthelc and #canceltheleavingcert as the two main hashtags on Twitter for a few hours. The next day, the Leaving Cert exams were cancelled, showing that when we fight and organise, we win.

Oppose any discrimination and unnecessary pressure on students!

However, the new arrangements that have been put in place are very far from satisfactory. First, the section of students who are preparing to sit Leaving Cert papers at a later stage have been left completely high and dry and have been banned from reaching out to schools and teachers after the official closure of classes on 11 May. Secondly, the “Plan B” or ‘calculated grading system’ proposed by the government is very close to the predictive grading system that has been put in place in the UK under the Tory government and will hugely discriminate working class students from working class communities and schools.

As soon as the exams were cancelled, the Dept of Education announced that “(calculated) marks will be adjusted to bring them into line with the expected distribution of school”. This ‘adjusting’ system as well as predictive grading need to be fully opposed. As a matter of fact, a 2016 study from Dr Gill Wyness of University College London shows that “the system of predicted grades is inaccurate. Only 16% of applicants achieved the A-level grade points that they were predicted to achieve, based on their best three A-levels.” The study also shows that applicants from low income homes are more likely to have their grades under predicted and that school profiling — which will see a student’s grades marked up or down in line with the past exam history of their school — will discriminate in particular against students in schools based in working class communities.

Besides, a huge section of working class students would have been juggling with mental health issues, difficult household situations or even with working part-time during the school year to save up for college. Most of them would therefore not have achieved their full or best potential throughout the school year and will see their predicted grades misrepresent their actual capacities. This underlines a real issue with the traditional Leaving Cert system that is based on cramming rather than

vocational training. Other factors of discrimination include students — especially from migrant communities — taking subjects outside of school and who don’t know if they will be able to be graded on those.

Students deserve a real break and no unnecessary pressure should be put on them. The Socialist Party and Mick Barry TD oppose the calculated grading system: no one should be issued with a fail this year, and a certificate to enter third level, apprenticeship or work should be handed to all.

The fundamental class issues of the Leaving Cert system

COVID-19 has played a key part in exacerbating inequalities amongst both Leaving Cert students and fifth year students who are still being asked to regurgitate a significant part of their Leaving Cert curriculum in very stressful and difficult conditions. Living in a busy household; not accessing proper devices or broadband; not having access to classroom interaction to fully engage with the curriculum and practice orals and other skills; having parents on the frontline; having family members or themselves affected by the virus — are only a few of the many reasons why students, and more specifically disadvantaged young people, have had their mental health and ability to study properly hugely impacted.

But those inequalities are not unique to the COVID-19 situation, they are part of the Leaving Cert system as a whole. Rather than nurturing inquisitive and intelligent youth, the Leaving Cert emphasises values of productivity and competition. Instead of being asked to develop intelligence and skills that would be useful for entering active life, students are required to regurgitate a full 18 months curriculum in a series of memory tests. This means that the Leaving Cert favours neurotypical middle-class students from stable families, who have quiet study spaces, can afford



The Leaving Cert puts enormous pressure on the mental health of young people

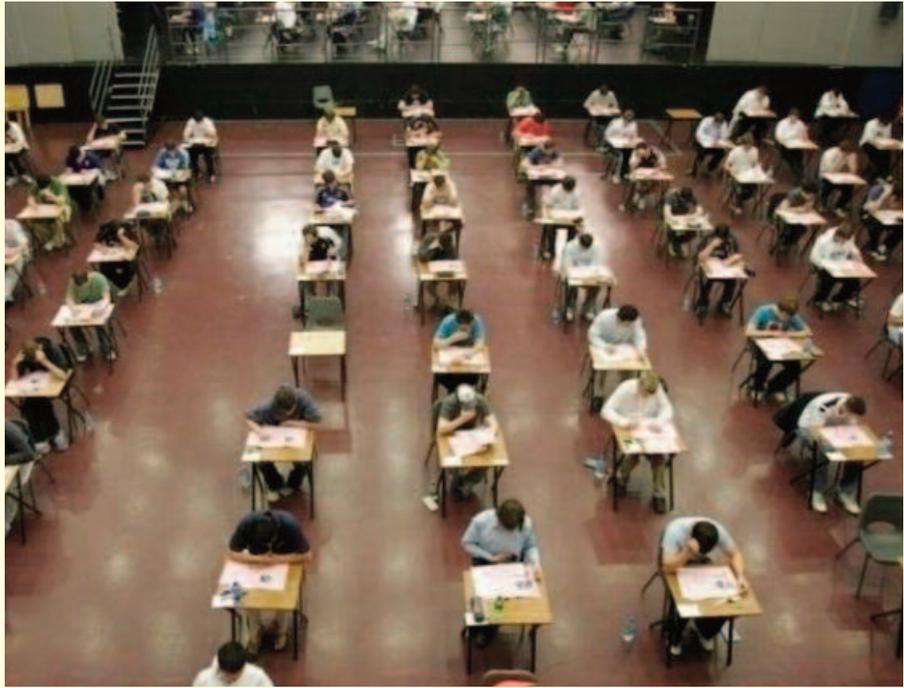
private education such as grinds and don't necessarily have to work part time to help sustain their families or save up for college. Not only does everyone not enter the exams on an equal foot, but the cramming nature of the Leaving Cert exams puts a huge and unacceptable strain on young people's mental health. A 2019 survey conducted by revision website Studyclix reported that 75% of Leaving Cert students experienced "extreme stress" as a direct result of the exams, with 28% suffering with depression.

Why does the Leaving Cert exist?

The Leaving Cert and its points system exist in order to help perpetuate a neo-liberal and right-wing agenda looking at short term profitability rather than at investing in necessary public services such as education. While Ireland has the 2nd lowest spending of education in Europe as a percentage of GDP, the government as planned to spend over €80 million in the Greyhound and Horse Racing industries this year. This really emphasises the priorities of a government that is more willing to invest in cruel and useless, yet profitable industries rather than to invest in third level education and expand places for anyone who'd like to enter college or university. Young people are being forced to compete in a battle for scarce third level places — disadvantaging students from lower income backgrounds — and the calculated grading system for the Leaving Cert class of 2020 is based on the same points system pitting students against one another.

Mass investment in third level and abolish the stressful and outdated Leaving Cert now!

Instead of refusing to accept the €15-plus billion Apple tax, the government should use it now and come up with a plan of emergency taxation on big corporations to massively invest in third level education. The money could be used to acquire places, hire more teachers (i.e. precariously employed postgrads and tutors), reduce the size of classrooms and scrap all entry fees, whilst ensuring access to a living grant for all. By increasing places in courses and apprenticeships and offering places for anyone who wants one, this year's students could enter third level without having to pit against one another in the middle of a pandemic. As well as that, such an alternative to the Leaving Cert exams next year could point a way forward to how third level should operate from now on and could allow the abolition of the stressful and outdated Leaving Cert system once and for all.

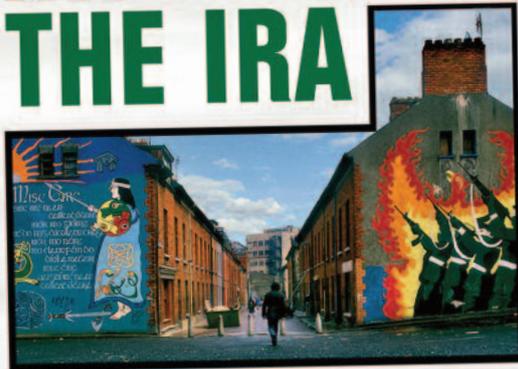


Young people can organise now!

This year, 5th and 6th years students are experiencing exacerbated inequalities and injustices which are embedded in the Leaving Cert system. The government which has completely disregarded the well being of students, has no interest in challenging the status quo. This is emphasised by their unwillingness to make concessions to young people and invest into third level education. Yet, students should have a say in their education. The victory around the cancellation of the Leaving Cert, as well as the recent workers' and young people's victories of the anti-water charges and the Repeal movements, show that if organised behind clear demands, young people – with parents and teachers behind them – have the power to put pressure on the government and force them to implement real change and a fair alternative to the Leaving Cert system that would remain independent and become truly impartial.

By international standards, the Irish educational system bears huge repressive and oppressive traditions. The fight for the abolition of the Leaving Cert exams should be linked with the fights to end of all forms of inequalities and oppression, to separate Church and State, for the real democratic management of the schools by teachers, parents and students and for a socialist alternative. A socialist alternative — where the economy and society would be democratically planned by workers and communities to put people's needs before profit — would be a system for each according to their abilities, which would not emphasise competition and values of productivity but would teach students to love learning and think with curiosity, with curriculums based around young people's aspirations, rather than around the demands of the capitalist class. ■

ONE MAN'S TERRORIST A POLITICAL HISTORY OF THE IRA



DANIEL FINN

REVIEW

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the formation of the Provisional IRA. This new book, *One Man's Terrorist: A political history of the IRA*, is therefore a timely study of this movement. SEÁN BURNS looks at the book and the lessons that can be learned for today.

Napoleon once said, "History is a fable agreed upon". In Northern Ireland, there is no agreed upon history, or rather there are multiple competing accounts. In nearly all of these, the independent role that the working-class has played is written out. Unfortunately, the author of this book also falls into this trap.

One Man's Terrorist is an account of the political developments of the Irish republican movement, with a particular focus on the North. The introduction begins with quite harrowing statistics of the death and injury toll during the conflict known as 'the Troubles' comparative to the population of Northern Ireland. "They were the equivalent of 125,000 deaths and nearly 2 million injuries in Britain".¹ This immediately puts the scale of the Troubles into perspective. Many workers and young people lost their lives, and tens of

thousands were either injured or imprisoned during the conflict. The severe mental strain placed upon the population has yielded an extraordinarily high rate of suicide and mental health problems which continue to express themselves today. More people have died as a result of suicide since the ceasefires than were killed over the course of the conflict.

The divisions which drove the conflict have not been resolved. They continue to largely define the political terrain in Northern Ireland to this day, more than 20 years after the Good Friday Agreement. The 'ceasefire generation' got a taste of the reality of paramilitary violence in the killing of Lyra McKee, a young journalist who was shot dead by a 'dissident' Republican gunman during a riot in Derry. Her killing sparked widespread anger. Vigils and protests were organised by her friends and family, as well as sections of the trade union movement. The popular sentiment was 'no going back' to the days of the widespread violence.

The armed dissident republicans who continue to wage their "war" are, on the whole, marginalised but still able to connect with some of the most hard-pressed sections of Catholic working-class youth, in areas such as the Bogside and Creggan where poverty and unemployment are facts of life. These are the conditions out of which paramilitarism can redevelop if an alternative is not posed. The existence and

activities of these groups act as a warning of what can develop if there is no resolution to the national question in Ireland. That is a prospect of renewed conflict and sectarian violence.

But this is, of course, not the 1960s or '70s. The basis upon which the Provisional IRA was able to sustain and develop itself has greatly diminished. A power-sharing administration between nationalists and Unionists has replaced Unionist dominance in the devolved government. British soldiers have been effectively withdrawn from the streets. Although disparities remain as a legacy of the past, discrimination against Catholics in access to jobs and homes is largely gone. The Provisional campaign was brought to an end partly because of a growing 'war weariness' among the population, given expression by mass protests against sectarian killings and paramilitary activity.

A serious study of Irish republicanism, its armed and political manifestations, is invaluable for socialists and working-class activists to understand the serious limitations and the negative role these ideas and methods have played throughout history. Unfortunately, this is something the author falls short of on a few occasions. The Socialist Party in Ireland bases itself upon the power of the working class and believes that common struggle of working-class people is necessary to change society and end the common misery of sectarian conflict, poverty and oppression that capitalism has to offer us. The forerunner of the Socialist Party, The Militant, at the time consistently opposed the mistaken methods of the IRA and other paramilitary organisations. We argued that the individual terrorist methods of the Provisional IRA were incapable of defeating British imperialism and actually acted to reinforce and increase sectarian division in Northern Ireland.

No stream to swim in

A "fish through the desert" is an aptly named chapter, detailing the isolation that republicanism faced throughout most of the 1950s and 1960s. The attempts of the IRA at the time to wage a "Border Campaign", where they carried out attacks against police barracks, failed to have any meaningful impact. Likewise, throughout the 1960s, the IRA failed to gain a resonance amongst the population, north or south of the border. This is reflected in the declining membership figures that the author details. However, a question that is not adequately answered in the book is - why was this the case? If the IRA could wage its armed campaign in '72, why not in '65?

The author, Daniel Finn, identifies some of the reasons. State repression acted as a recruitment sergeant for the IRA. The events of Bloody Sunday in 1972, where British paratroopers gunned down 14 unarmed civil rights protesters in Derry, drove many young Catholics into the arms of the PIRA. They saw in them a vehicle to strike back against the system which meted out acts of brutality and offered them



Bloody Sunday 1972: The murders by the British state pushed many Catholic youths into the arms of the IRA

only a future of poverty and unemployment. Throughout the conflict, callous acts of repression by British imperialism would play this role repeatedly.

However a major omission as to why the IRA and other paramilitary forces were unable to gain mass traction throughout most of the 1960s was that working-class people from both Protestant and Catholic backgrounds were beginning to struggle together against the status quo. The author makes some reference to the Northern Ireland Labour Party's (NILP) electoral success. But he downplays its significance.

The road not taken

In the 1960s, the NILP, for all its weaknesses, had a mass base of support. In 1962, it gained 62,175 votes in Belfast, compared to 67,350 for the Unionist candidates. This represented 26% of the votes cast. The total left-wing vote in Belfast was 32.8%. Even after the violence of August 1969, the NILP retained mass support and achieved 105,759 votes in the 1970 general election.

The author dismisses Labour's support politically, and also the prospect of united class struggle. He quotes the promises of "a social & economic revolution" from the old Unionist leadership made at the time and states, "that proved enough to avoid the specter of defeat", before swiftly moving on.² He, in essence, articulates the idea that unity was not possible at this point as a result of promises made to Protestant workers. Contrary to what the author presents, the idea that workers could be united both industrially and politically was not utopian but was a living reality at the time. The 1960s saw the Unionist establishment scramble to tackle the rising class struggle and the increasing unity of Catholic and Protestant workers by resorting to sectarian bigotry.

The most remarkable development in the early 1960s was a generalised shift to the left in society.

Catholic workers saw the IRA and their methods as offering no coherent alternative to the discrimination and poverty that they faced at the hands of the Unionist establishment. Likewise, Protestant workers were increasingly engaging in strike action against their bosses and looking leftwards. The lords and ladies of official Unionism were quick to take note of these developments. For them, their majority was secure so long as Catholics voted for nationalists and Protestants voted for Unionists. The possibility of the labour movement bridging that sectarian divide posed serious issues for them and they responded to its growth with vitriol.

“Employers should consult the unionist register and pick their employees from it” – this is often quoted as an example of the intransigent sectarianism of the Unionist government, but its real significance is often overlooked.³ It was made on 5th March 1961, just after titanic strikes of both Catholic and Protestant workers rocked the Belfast shipyard. It is not for no reason that the old Unionist regime at the time scrambled to resurrect the “Unionist Labour Clubs”. These associations were designed to tie together Protestant workers under the banner of Unionism rather than class, in order to disrupt the developing unity between workers. They were not to make much impact, however.

Civil rights struggle explodes

Young people looked elsewhere for methods to struggle. Events internationally would have an explosive effect. The idea that mass struggle was necessary to enact change, as well as the ideas of socialism and class struggle, were being brought to the fore. From the late 1950s, the black civil rights movement convulsed the United States and, in the ‘long hot summer of 1967’, riots rocked dozens of cities as the downtrodden rose up in revolt. The year of 1968 was dominated above all by the May revolutionary “evenements” in France. A general strike of ten million workers demonstrated the power of the working class, and President de Gaulle fled the country, openly voicing his fear that the game was up for capitalism. These events displayed clearly the power of class struggle, strikes and mass movements, and were a source of inspiration for young people and workers in Northern Ireland at the time.

The civil rights movement, although predominantly Catholic, gained an echo among Protestant youth, at least initially. They were inspired by what they were witnessing internationally, and outraged at the conditions of discrimination and poverty that existed at home. An illustration of the rampant poverty in the 1960s was that nearly 100,000 homes were declared “unfit for human habitation”, spanning both Protestant and Catholic areas.

It was the failure of the labour movement to decisively intervene that allowed the so-called ‘moderates’, such as John Hume, to stamp their authority on the civil rights movement. Hume, a voice for the conservative Catholic middle class, argued

vehemently against class or socialist ideas that might ‘split’ his aim of all-class, “Catholic unity.” This watered down the programmatic demands to those simply demanding more rights for Catholics, an equality of poverty, not the broad class demands that had previously been put forward. This allowed the government to paint it as a movement against Protestants and dissuade broad cross-community from developing. Unionist die-hards such as Paisley were an isolated minority through most of the 1960s, viewed as a rabid fringe element by the majority of Protestant workers. As the civil rights movement became increasingly framed in terms of Catholic rather than class unity, however, they were able to begin to make strides forward.

Likewise, the conservative heads of the NILP and the trade union movement stood aside during the stormy events of 1969. The trade union leadership, heading a 210,000 strong movement of both Catholic and Protestant workers, sat aloof from the turmoil - through months of demonstrations, counter-demonstrations, riots and mounting tension – restricting themselves to praising the Unionist government for the partial reforms that were forced upon them and to issuing sanctimonious pleas for calm.

If they had instead launched a struggle for civil rights, decent jobs and housing for all working-class people, as well as challenging the repression being meted out by the Unionist establishment, a united working-class opposition could have been built.

Splits in republicanism

It was in the context of these huge upheavals that leading members of the Southern establishment, including future Taoiseach Charles Haughey, sought to intervene into the situation to protect capitalism’s interests. They were terrified of what was developing behind the barricades in Northern Ireland, with new organisations being thrown up that they had little to no influence over and socialist ideas spreading. Their ‘assistance’ was aimed at buying organisational and political influence so as to limit the movement in the North by harnessing it safely in the halter of Catholic sectarianism and nationalism

They offered £100,000 to supply weapons to the IRA but firm conditions were attached. These were that the ‘socialist’ policies of the IRA should be dropped, that there should be a separate Northern command structure for the IRA, and that all IRA military activity be confined to the North.

The first issue of *An Phoblacht* sums up the politics of the new Provisional leadership:

“Gradually into executive positions, both in the IRA and Sinn Fein, the Red Agents infiltrated and soon these men became the policymakers. Young men and girls were brainwashed with the teachings and propaganda of the new policymakers and well trained organisers were sent into different areas to spread the teachings of these Red Infiltrators”.

It is worth spending some time considering the debates that developed over political programme. The split between the 'Provos' and Officials was not just, as the author succinctly puts it, between "soldiers" and "politicians". But the author does warn against "reading too much" into the "finer details", ie the politics, and quotes Kieran Conway in saying that it was not the first concern for many IRA volunteers.⁴ There is quite clearly a certain truth in this, insofar as it is unquestionable that, in the stormy events of the late 1960s and early '70s, action spoke louder than words, particularly for a new generation dubbed the 69ers. However, the split in the IRA and the political debate that emerged were not insignificant and have lasting effects to this day.

Contrary to what the newly founded Provisional leadership would argue, Johnston and Goulding - who went on to become leading members of the Officials - were not advocating the dropping of nationalism for socialism. Nor were they pushing for a genuine turn to the left. As the author suggests, "If Johnston had wanted to guide republicans further to the left then he was pushing at an open door".⁵ Their programme was reminiscent of the Stalinist position of the 1930s, proposing an all-class "anti-imperialist" alliance. History here and elsewhere has demonstrated that the working-class is subordinated in such alliances to the interests of the capitalist and middle class leaders. The reality of this programme was played out in the civil rights movement, the potential of which was scuppered by nationalist leaders like Hume.

This programme, and variants of it, would be utilised by the Provisionals as well at various stages. It presented the struggle for socialism in stages. That first you fight for Irish unity on the basis of capitalism, then for socialism. This inevitably meant that the question of class was pushed beneath the national struggle in a futile attempt to unite exploiter and exploited.

Such a formula crashed against the rocks of sectarianism. For Protestant workers, the prospect of capitalist unification with an economically and socially backward Southern state in which they feared being an oppressed minority was a complete anathema. The adoption of left-sounding rhetoric by the Provisionals would damage the name of socialism by associating it with the armed campaign of the Provos in the minds of working-class Protestants.

"The Great Moment"

"Individual terrorism" is the Marxist term for the tactic of assassinating representatives of the ruling class or of the state forces, employed by secretive armed groups. In place of mass action by the working class, these groups substitute their deeds. The working class is expected to provide support, but otherwise simply observe the struggle. Individual terrorism has never succeeded in defeating a modern capitalist government anywhere.

Trotsky's writings on individual terror are quite prophetic in this regard: "By its very essence terrorist

work demands such concentrated energy for "the great moment," such an overestimation of the significance of individual heroism, and finally, such a "hermetic" conspiracy, that - if not logically, then psychologically - it totally excludes agitational and organisational work among the masses."⁶

The "great moment" for the Provos was always one more push to achieve British withdrawal. This mantra, repeated for 20 years, was never fulfilled. The Provos could never militarily defeat the British state and, conversely, the British state could not militarily quash the Provisionals. It was recognition that the IRA campaign could not succeed - and also recognition that the Protestant population, rather than the British, were the main barrier to a united Ireland - that forced the republican leadership to try to find another road.

Armed campaign rife with contradictions

Today, a more romanticised view of the Provisional campaign is presented - that of gallant volunteers with the mass of the Catholic population behind them. Reality is more complicated. The blatant contradiction in the IRA campaign was that its greatest military successes were also its greatest political failures. Successfully carrying out bombings and shootings, particularly when there were civilian casualties, provoked a backlash from both Catholic and Protestant workers - for example, the Enniskillen bombing, which killed 11 civilians on Remembrance Sunday. It was when British imperialism came down in a heavy-handed manner, meting out acts of brutality and repression, that the Provisionals gained sympathy and support. This was most epitomised in the callous role of Thatcher during the 1981 hunger strikes.

The terror tactics employed by the PIRA also had the opposite effect to that intended so far as a challenge to the state was concerned. Far from weakening the British state, they gave it space and an excuse to introduce increasingly repressive measures and for those measures to become normalised. The use of diplock courts, plastic bullets and live ammunition all became norms in Northern Ireland. In Britain, when the miners sought to take on Thatcher through their strike action in the 1980s, repressive policing methods perfected in Belfast were used against mining communities.

"One man's terrorist"

The IRA's support amounted to only a minority of the Catholic minority and, whatever the IRA's stated intention, the objective result of its armed campaign was to stoke the flames of sectarianism, increasing divisions amongst Catholic and Protestant workers, and to vastly reduce any prospect of its stated aim of "British withdrawal".

The sectarian edge to the Provisional campaign was not immediately obvious when they attacked soldiers and other members of the state's repressive apparatus. The author illustrates a more naked expression of sectarianism emanating from the heads of the



The Enniskillen bombing provoked a backlash from Protestants and Catholics forcing the PIRA to apologise claiming it was a "mistake"

Provisionals leadership when he quotes Seán Mac Stiofáin on the question of Protestant opposition post-united Ireland: "There would be no place for those who say they want their British heritage. They've got to accept their Irish heritage... otherwise there would be no place for them".

Their fundamental method was sectarian in nature. They ignored the views and aspirations of Protestants. This same dismissiveness reflects itself today in the debates around a border poll. While they speak of reaching out to the Protestant community, the underlying reality of the position of Sinn Féin today is that, like it or lump it, capitalist unity is inevitable. They have no qualms that by a simple majority, one community can be coerced into a state they have no desire to be a part of. This displays a profound amnesia on their part. Catholics did not, and will not, abandon their aspiration for reunification even when they were a minority for decades. Neither will Protestants abandon their opposition to a united Ireland if they become a minority within the Northern state. A majority at the ballot box does not eradicate the clash of aspirations and identities that is present in the North.

It was hard to disguise this sectarian edge when car bombs destroyed the centres of largely Protestant towns. At other times, the Provos campaign was nakedly and viciously sectarian – for example, in the period of 1975-76, more than 60 Protestant civilians died in sectarian attacks.

Even when the actions of IRA volunteers were not intentionally sectarian, the campaign as a whole was objectively sectarian and acted to deepen division rather than break it down. The author references this reality, "To a large extent the Provos were fighting a war of attrition against the Protestant community in arms".⁷ The "Ulsterisation" of the security forces compounded this. Even when members of the state forces, such as UDR soldiers, were targeted, this was viewed as an attack upon the Protestant community and drove them further into the hands of the state.

Likewise, their bombing campaign against commercial targets – such as Bloody Friday, when the PIRA detonated 20 bombs in the space of eight minutes in Belfast city center, killing nine people, including five civilians – drove young Protestants into the hands of loyalist paramilitaries. Former PUP leader David Irvine explained that he joined the UVF in the aftermath of these bombings, and thousands joined the UDA and UFF.

The forerunner of the Socialist Party at the time, in an article written by Peter Hadden, warned what the reality of these methods meant: "The IRA does have a military capacity – not to shift or drive out the British – but to stir up sectarian reaction in Northern Ireland. The fear created by the Canary Wharf bomb (in London) has not been fear of a new and effective "anti-imperialist struggle" by the IRA, but fear that any new campaign could push Northern Ireland over the precipice towards all-out sectarian conflict."⁸

Nationalism & Socialists

Marxists are the utmost defenders of democratic rights. This does not mean, as some on the left crudely present, solely the rights of Catholic workers. We defend the democratic and national rights of all communities on this island. Any attempt to coerce any community into an arrangement which they do not consent to is a recipe for sectarian conflict and ultimately – unless the working class unites in a struggle for socialism – civil war. The history of partition is testament to that.

Socialists base ourselves on the fundamental unity of the working class in the unions, workplaces and in struggles. We campaign to give this unity political expression, campaigning for the building of a mass anti-sectarian party of the working class. We advocate a socialist Ireland - with full and equal rights for all communities, including the protection of minorities – in a voluntary socialist federation with a socialist Scotland, Wales & England.

Unfortunately, throughout much of the book, the author downplays the role of the working-class and the effect of class struggle upon the republican movement and society more generally. While ultimately concluding that the armed campaign was a failure, and commenting upon the effect that it had in intensifying sectarian divisions in the North, the author does not grapple with the sectarian logic of the campaign in ignoring and dismissing the views and aspirations of the Protestant community. Despite these limitations, *One Man's Terrorist* provides quite a detailed and comprehensive account of the republican movement that is worth reading. ■

Notes

- 1 Dan Finn, *One Man's Terrorist* (Verso 2020) pg.1 ● 2 Ibid, pg 38 ● 3 Peter Hadden, *Common History Common Struggle* ● 4 *One Man's Terrorist*, pg 38 ● 5 Ibid, pg 73 ● 6 Leon Trotsky, *The Bankruptcy of Individual Terrorism*, 1909 ● 7 *One Man's Terrorist*, pg 171 ● 8 Peter Hadden, "Has Republicanism reached an impasse?", March 1996

Home

By Eoin Ó Broin

Merrion Press, 2019

Reviewed by Michael O'Brien

Though published in early 2019, Sinn Féin's surge in this year's general election fuelled a fresh spike in sales of this book pushing it back into the best sellers' shelves.

Eoin Ó Broin has been Sinn Féin's housing spokesperson since his entry into the Dáil in 2016. In some measure this book documents his activity in the Dáil around the issue, particularly on the Special All Party Committee on Housing and Homelessness that was established shortly after the 2016 general election and subsequently on the Oireachtas Committee for Housing, Planning and Local Government.

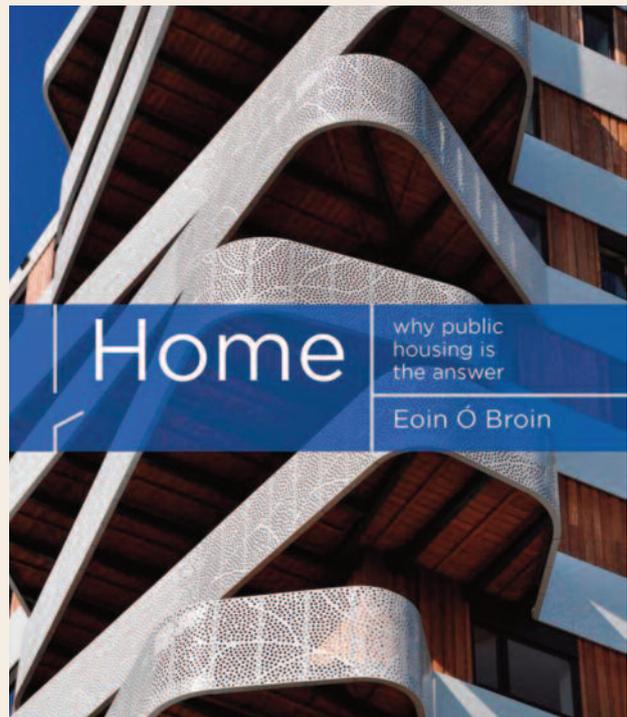
Two of three main sections give an informative history of official housing policy in Ireland from the late 19th century to the present. This takes us from the land reforms of the British government in response to the agitation of the Land League, to the alternating Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil dominated governments throughout the history of the state.

Positive lessons, relevant to the present, can be drawn from how mass protest action and agitation can force upon reluctant government's improvements in the housing situation. Curiously Ó Broin makes only a passing reference to the Dublin Housing Action Committee active in the 1960s and early 70s. Their direct action and agitation led by left-wing and labour movement activists presaged the last major public housing projects in the state in the 1970s, such as Tallaght and Clondalkin.

Ó Broin does provide a sense of proportion about the performance of the governments in the early decades of the state when it comes to public housing. Relative to what preceded in the early 20th century and the pitiful levels of public housing delivery over recent decades it is understandable that the capacity of governments to annually deliver thousands of public homes, particularly from the 1930s to the 1970s, has been a useful propaganda point.

However, even throughout this period what resources that were put into public housing were heavily outweighed by state support and grants for people seeking to be homeowners. Though not fully explored in this book at the heart of this policy was a desire by governments to construct what they saw as a middle class home-owning bulwark.

The detailed tracking of changes in housing policy and the role of private finance in the housing sector from the 1980s onwards is particularly useful. The acute accommodation crisis we have endured since 2013 is the culmination of processes going back much further. This began with the depletion of public housing stock through tenant buyout schemes, underinvestment in



new public housing stock, uncontrolled land prices, the activities of institutional investors, under-spending of Traveller accommodation budgets and the existence of Direct Provision. These have all combined to leave vast numbers of people locked out of public housing and unable to buy a home at an affordable price and in intolerable situations.

The third part of the book where Ó Broin sets out his alternative is at best a mixed bag. The measures he proposes would clearly improve the situation. However, Ó Broin's position that resolving the housing crisis once and for all can be done within the fiscal restrictions and without fundamentally challenging the capitalist market is a miseducation of the reader. It speaks a great deal to O'Broin and Sinn Féin's political trajectory.

Punches are consistently pulled in this section. A free pass is given to Approved Housing Bodies, which should be superfluous in a socialist housing solution. The strike of investment of private developers he argues should be dealt with by a punitive land tax, rather than these lands being nationalised (with no compensation) by the state. He envisages an ongoing place for private rented accommodation and a landlord class, albeit reduced in size in the context of an overall solution. It is true that within an overall accommodation solution you need provision for short term letting for students and for short to medium term migrant workers, but there is no reason why this category can't be provided for publicly.

We are prepared for measures that fall short at the start. The philosophy Eoin Ó Broin brings to bear in this book is spelled out at the end of the 'overture' (rather than 'preface', 'chapters' and 'epilogue' the book is bizarrely structured like a piece of classical music with 'overture', 'movements' and 'coda'!)

"Somewhere between the sincerity of inadequate amelioration and the energy of impossibilist rupture lies

a pathway to a functional housing system that guarantees all people a place they can call home.” [my emphasis]

In plainer speak this is a dig against the socialist left who situate the housing crisis as a manifestation of capitalism and see the permanent solutions lying in socialist policies. This means breaking with the economic status quo through organising and building a

mass movement based on working-class struggle. Despite the vast resources at its disposal Sinn Féin have been unwilling to build such a movement.

There is acknowledgement of the role of social movements but at best in the eyes of Ó Broin they are there to assist the struggle for immediate reform as an end in itself. For him and his party the capitalist system is to be accepted as a given. ■

Normal People

Directed by Lenny Abrahamson
BBC 3, 2020

Reviewed by Harper Cleves

Sally Rooney’s novel *Normal People* and Lenny Abrahamson’s BBC adaptation of this novel have been the subject of widespread adoration and controversy. Criticisms hurled at both works have ranged from hailing Rooney as ‘the Marxist voice of a generation’ to diminishing both the novel and screen adaptation to a series of ‘longing stares exchanged’ between ‘extremely privileged people.’ Reviews tend to over-focus on either the micro-detail of the relationship between the two protagonists, or the capital ‘P’ Politics (or lack thereof) in both works. Both contain a certain truth, and yet neither captures the nuance, and the interplay of the detail and the broader context in which these two protagonists exist and fall in love.

The novel and the series (which Rooney co-wrote), follows the relationship between Marianne and Connell (played by Daisy Edgar Jones and Paul Mescal respectively). Both attend the same secondary school in Sligo, but come from drastically different backgrounds.

Marianne comes from a wealthy family. Her mother is a solicitor, as was her father, who has passed away. The tension in the family is clear from the onset, without being explicitly stated. The older brother hovers menacingly at the edges of frames as the mother sits expressionless in the next room. Marianne eventually reveals to Connell that her father was physically abusive.

Connell, by contrast, is from a working class background. His mother works as a cleaner for Marianne’s family. He is the product of an accidental teen pregnancy, and his father is not in the picture. His home environment by contrast is warm. His mother, Lorraine (played by Sarah Greene) teases him about his romantic life and is frank with him when he disappoints her. Connell ends each phone call and interaction with his mother with a routine ‘I love you.’

Rooney is often hailed as a Marxist writer, and the influence of Marxism can be felt in her works. In *Normal People*, Connell recommends that Marianne read *The Communist Manifesto*. Marianne makes passing



comments on overproduction under capitalism. In Rooney’s debut novel, *Conversations with Friends*, one of the characters explains Engels’ theory on the development of the patriarchal family. One of the criticisms leftists have made of Abrahamson’s adaption of the series is that the removal of such components depoliticised the work. I would disagree. Much has been said about the exploration of class by Rooney. It was these explorations that Abrahamson mastered. Connell experiencing the alienation of attending courses with people who abstractly discuss issues of material wealth will be a familiar experience for many working-class people attending university. Meanwhile, Marianne finds herself initially comfortable and popular for the first time in her life. Abrahamson does a particularly striking job of jumping between these two perspectives in the pool party scene. When Connell is feeling out of place amidst ruminations on summer holidays to Barcelona and Berlin, the scene feels as if it is in slow motion. Marianne, at home in the wealth, but insecure in her ability to have genuine human connections, perceives Connell’s discomfort as indifference to her. In Rooney’s novel it was these moments that stuck in my mind a year later. References to *The Communist Manifesto*,

while interesting, and reflective of Rooney's upbringing in a left-wing family in Mayo, were not central.

One of the more interesting criticisms lobbed at Rooney is that she is overly Victorian in her telling of a 'will they, won't they' romance with class dynamics. In fact, Rooney has pointed to the Victorian novel as an influence. Some of the elements of the Victorian novel are there; the intimacy of an overlong glance and the eroticism of a simple touch. The deep exploration of one relationship at the expense of developing peripheral characters. And yet to limit Rooney's narratives and characters to that of a salacious, anti-feminist bodice ripper is to miss the detail.

A friend of mine in an Instagram story speculated that 'The real theme of *Normal People* is that Irish people don't know how to communicate.' It's a funny commentary, but it could in fact be applied more broadly. Victorian relationships, explored by the likes of the Brontë sisters, were limited and drawn out through bourgeois social norms and gender dynamics. Characters admired each other from afar. Romance often occurred indirectly. The Monty Python sketch of Catherine and Heathcliff communicating via semaphore in *Wuthering Heights* comes to mind.

Rooney's characters, by contrast, appear socially liberated. They have sex. They discuss non-monogamy. They debate power dynamics in their college courses. They are unhindered in their social interactions in a way that the Victorian-era protagonists Rooney drew from were not. And yet, the miscommunication persists. Marianne, after returning from a weekend home in Sligo where she was verbally abused by her brother and then chastised for provoking him by her mother, cries silently watching television with Connell. She attributes her tears to period cramps. Connell, after having lost his restaurant job, has to move back home to Sligo for the summer. He wants to stay with Marianne in Dublin, but

he doesn't ask, and Marianne, assuming that she is essentially unlovable, doesn't offer.

The social relations and norms have changed since the Victorian-era. Undeniable progress has been made. Ireland, as a part of a global trend, has seen a massive expansion of third level education. Up until the 1960s a character like Connell would have not been able to finish secondary school, never mind college, and even up to the 1990s it was rare for working-class young people to attend university. Marianne seems removed from the days of the Magdalen laundries and women's confinement to the home with her Erasmus trips to Sweden, and her eloquent banter in college courses. And yet, Connell feels out of place in Trinity, and caught between his erudite, abstract middle-class peers of college, and his friends working at home in Sligo. Marianne suffers multiple abusive relationships, and deep alienation. Though social progress has been won in the years that separate Brontë and Rooney, the fundamental inequality in society that provides the framework for human relationships persists. The strength of Rooney's political message is in the deep exploration of love in a capitalist world, where every inequality and injustice creates potential for misunderstanding.

There are a million other details of the text and series that could be and should be examined: the sensitivity around sex; the tragic death of Connell's school friend Rob; the Trinity scholarship exams. All of these details contribute to a narrative that is above all extremely human and rooted in the realities of modern Ireland. The poignancy of *Normal People*, in all of its forms, is not in explicit references to Marx or communism, but in demonstrating the unnecessary and heinous difficulties this system thrusts upon us and prompting us as viewers to imagine a world in which two young people in love are not subject to such *quotidienne* cruelty. ■

Burned

By Sam McBride

Published by Merrion Press, 2019

Reviewed by Daniel Waldron

In *Burned*, News Letter journalist Sam McBride delves in great detail into the story of the 'cash for ash' scandal which triggered the collapse of the Northern Ireland Executive in January 2017, drawing from the evidence given to the Coghlin Inquiry, his own research and envelopes full of leaked emails which routinely landed on his desk. The story which unfolds is illuminating on a number of levels, but is perhaps most revealing with regard to the close relationship between the Stormont politicians – particularly the DUP – and big business.

The Northern Ireland non-domestic Renewable Heat Incentive (RHI) scheme was launched in 2012 by the Department for Enterprise, Trade & Investment (DETI) – then headed by current DUP leader and First Minister Arlene Foster – with the supposed aim of meeting EU targets for use of sustainable heat sources. The scheme was almost an exact copy of its counterpart in Britain. However, it had one crucial element stripped out – cost controls.

Those with biomass boilers under the scheme were given a subsidy based upon its usage. With the subsidy set higher than the cost of the fuel and with no limit on usage, this created a perverse incentive to generate heat unnecessarily in order to make a profit, with the tariffs supposedly locked in for 20 years. Rather than encouraging efficiency and promoting environmentally friendly practise, it did the opposite. Unsurprisingly, reports of empty barns being heated round the clock to maximise income soon arose.

Why were the cost controls removed? This question is difficult to answer definitively because of the system of oral government instituted by the DUP and Sinn Féin. Minutes of meetings were regularly not taken by civil servants, while much governmental communication was kept off the official record. This allowed the parties to distance themselves from unpopular decisions. However, civil servants testified to the Inquiry that they believed they were working under Ministerial direction to make the scheme more generous than in Britain.

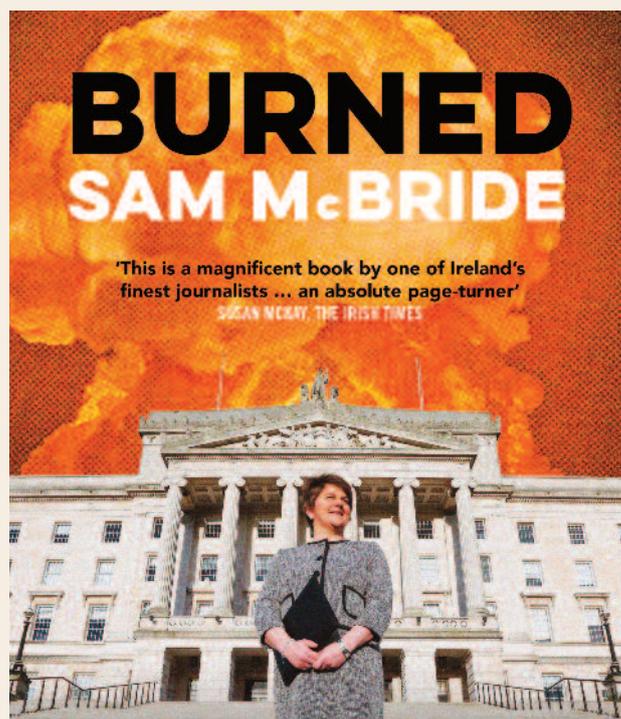
Senior civil servants, the DUP ministers who oversaw the scheme and their special advisors (spads) – highly paid, temporary civil servants appointed by their party – would all claim that they were unaware of this flaw, despite repeated warnings from multiple sources. Indeed, DETI staff were routinely attending industry events where RHI was openly being advertised by boiler installers as a ‘burn to earn’ scheme.

While Foster would deny it, communications from her spad, Andrew Crawford, and others would suggest the relaxed attitude to the cost of the scheme was at least partly due to politicians and officials labouring under the false belief that the bill would be entirely covered by the Treasury. Only when it dawned on them, years after the scheme’s launch, that the overspend – at one point, estimated to be as much as £700 million – would come out of Northern Ireland’s budget, and potentially have a political cost to them, did panic ensue.

This feckless attitude to UK taxpayers’ money from politicians who profess to put the Union above all is clearly a bugbear for McBride. However, the money drawn down through the scheme was never going to benefit the people of Northern Ireland as a whole. Indeed, most of it made its way, indirectly at least, into the coffers of big business, and one multinational in particular – major poultry producer Moy Park.

The DUP’s Andrew Crawford emerges as a central character in the story. While he was a key figure in the department overseeing the scheme, he passed on confidential documents to family members who subsequently became claimants. More important, however, is his close connection with Moy Park. When price controls were finally being considered, he worked to delay and dilute them, and also tipped the company off so they could rush their suppliers in on the ‘burn to earn’ tariff. In the end, almost half of all claimants on the scheme would be connected to Moy Park. He would also seek to obscure the particular role of the poultry industry, dominated by Moy Park, in the overspend.

Suggestions of corrupt connections between the DUP and wealthy interests are nothing new – Red Sky, NAMA, Paisley Jnr’s holidays, the list goes on. What becomes clear, however, is that Crawford’s role as a de facto agent of Moy Park was reflective of the attitude of the Stormont Executive as a whole, which went to extraordinary lengths to assist the company’s expansion. A special team of civil servants was dedicated to the task. The company was given huge



grants and subsidies, and assisted in getting around environmental, planning and state aid regulations.

While it is not possible to say definitively because of the informal and secretive nature of Stormont’s operations, McBride raises the question of whether the flawed nature of RHI was a conscious decision to assist Moy Park. It was certainly very convenient for the company. The new heating systems for its suppliers didn’t cost Moy Park a penny, but cut levels of ammonia produced, previously a barrier to its growth. It also allowed Moy Park to cut heat-related payments to its suppliers, forcing many farmers onto the scheme, as these were now being covered through public funds. This contributed to a spike in the firm’s profits.

McBride sees this as undermining the healthy working of a capitalist free market. In reality, this is the modus operandi of modern capitalism. The state acts always to defend the profits of big business. This was graphically demonstrated both in the wake of the 2008 financial crash and now, in the midst of the Covid-19 crisis, with governments rushing to bail out banks and major corporations, and the cost being put on the shoulders of ordinary people. It was also seen in the united campaign by the main Stormont parties to secure the power to cut corporation tax.

While the DUP is undoubtedly the party most heavily implicated in the RHI scandal, the other Stormont parties do not come off well either. There was a failure of the Assembly to adequately scrutinise what was going on, with a culture of simply nodding through legislation not related to divisive, Orange vs Green issues, reflecting the reality that the main parties are largely on the same neo-liberal page when it comes to economic and social policy.

When the scale of the crisis became clear and moves

were made to shut the scheme entirely, Sinn Féin ministers intervened to keep it open for an additional two weeks, and acted to screen their DUP Executive partners from scrutiny. It was only when the scandal emerged in the public domain almost a year later that they called for Foster to temporarily step down as First Minister. But they initially resisted calls for a public inquiry and aimed to keep the Stormont show on the road.

However, the swell of public outrage became irresistible. McBride refers to the BBC Spotlight investigation into the scheme which was aired in December 2016, with reporter Conor Spackman symbolically throwing bundles of notes into a boiler. Watching this, McBride says he was angered as he thought about his mother-in-law, who just weeks earlier had been forced by lengthy NHS waiting lists to pay to see a private neurological consultant and be diagnosed with motor neurone disease. The obvious connection between the impact of austerity and Stormont allowing money to literally go up in smoke enraged people from all backgrounds.

Already under pressure from below, a provocative cut to an Irish language grant by the DUP's Paul Givan was the final straw. Sinn Féin withdrew from the Executive and collapsed the institutions. What followed

was a highly sectarianised election, in which both parties shifted the debate onto divisive issues to distract from their role in RHI.

Burned touches upon many other themes – the nepotism and backbiting within the DUP; incompetent or disinterested ministers; civil servants struggling to grapple with issues they knew little about in under-resourced departments, while a bloated apparatus acted to protect the political interests of the two main parties; the inefficient outsourcing of expertise; the revolving door between industries and the public bodies meant to regulate them; the relationship between Stormont and the media.

Fundamentally, however, Burned serves as a damning indictment of the system of government which exists at Stormont, where Unionist and nationalist politicians collaborate, often secretly, in implementing neo-liberal policies and serving the interests of big business, while cynically whipping up sectarian tensions when it suits their ends. It serves as an example of how capitalism's incessant drive for profit undermines and perverts even limited attempts to tackle climate change. Its revelations underline the need to build an anti-sectarian, socialist voice for the working class, in order to challenge this rotten status quo and the system of capitalism itself. ■

A Planet to Win

By K. Aronoff, A. Battistoni, D.A. Cohen,
T. Riofrancos
Verso, 2019

Reviewed by Amy Ferguson

Faced with climate catastrophe, the last year has seen the development of important environmental movements and a search for policies that can allow us to transition to an environmentally friendly society. This book is one of many in the last year that makes the case for a green new deal.

In chapter one, the authors correctly conclude that the liberal answer of small individual changes to overcome catastrophe is fundamentally false because it is not working class people who are at fault. They explain, "human beings are creative complicated beings stuck in a capitalist system where a tiny number of people direct most major investments to maximise profits and shape government action accordingly." It is noted that the capitalist system externalizes its costs onto communities and ecosystems, and prioritises the bank accounts of CEOs over the long term habitability of the planet and the people who live on it.

Karl Marx had explained over 100 years ago;



“Capitalism tends to destroy its two sources of wealth: nature and human beings.” With the poverty rate in the UK, one of the richest countries in the world, currently resting at 1 in 5, and with only 100 corporations responsible for 71% of carbon emissions, this couldn’t be more obvious to us today.

It is from this point of understanding that the authors begin to formulate a solution. They criticise the fact that the climate movement in the past has been focused on the actions of the individual, as previously mentioned, but also that demands have had a tendency to be abstract and so having little appeal to ordinary working class people. For example, the long used slogan “80 by 50” (reduce our carbon emissions by 80% by 2050) means little to nothing outside of climate activist circles.

So with this in mind, the authors - again, correctly - explain that in order to build a movement to save the earth, you must get working class people on board, and to do so the movement must relate to people by proving that the fight against climate catastrophe is fundamentally tied to the fight for better living and working conditions. For example, through the creation of green, socially necessary, union strong, well paid jobs. At first these jobs may take the form of building / rebuilding eco friendly housing (which could deal with unemployment and the housing crisis in one) or renewable energy technology, conservation work, the transformation of old mines into museums, childcare and a more extensive after school programmes to allow parents to also enjoy more free time. Fundamentally, they state that the ultimate goal is redefining and reducing work. For instance, with workers in their unions having more control over their industries at the expense of profit hungry bosses, developments in automation would mean the reduction of the working week, with no loss of pay, rather than the loss of jobs.

It is also explained that in order to achieve this kind of society it is necessary to build a movement based upon common solidarity amongst working-class people, consisting of trade unions and community groups, to actively mobilise to fight for these things. They express, “Radical change only happens when millions of people are organizing, striking and marching, shaping politics and the economy from below.”

Unfortunately, whilst the authors recognise that “capitalism is incompatible with environmental stability”, they qualify that statement with saying, “we have just over a decade to cut across carbon emissions in half. We don’t imagine ending capitalism that quickly.” Whilst paying lip service to revolutionary change and workers action, the authors ignore, or have no faith in, the genuine power and potential of the working class to break with capitalism, in favour of a programme reliant upon maneuvers within the capitalist system, which are dependent upon progressive politicians invoking change and the capitalist class “complying with democratic values”, which they have proven time and time again, that they are not capable of doing. Such as, historically, when a Latin American country has elected a left government, they are suddenly faced with capitalist coups.

Restricting yourself to action within the capitalist system, when the current situation requires a break from that system, falls short of what is needed. The authors note that the shift in energy sources to coal and oil deepened imperialist and capitalist relations. They state that in order to avoid the same happening with a transition to renewable sources (particularly with necessary supplies like lithium), it is necessary to build internationalism from below in which climate action groups struggle alongside trade unions to protect the environment and the lives of working-class people, by fighting to “decarbonize, decommodify, decolonise and democratise” our energy grids. However, one thing that is not understood by the authors of this book is that the demands they express are not possible within the confines of capitalism.

Capitalism is a system based and reliant upon constant economic growth and profit margins, no matter the costs upon the planet or human life. The capitalist class has shown time and time again that they are unwilling to allow even minute changes to paper over the cracks of the catastrophe. Only a socialist society can deal with this crisis; by taking energy, transport, production and other key sectors of the economy into democratic public ownership, so that they can be planned to meet the needs of people and the planet. Key to achieve this is building a mass movement which links young people to the organised working-class and its ability to bring capitalism to its knees through its industrial power. ■

