

RESISTANCE

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Lies, fraud and crooked deals ...

Bertie the Bum

By Fintan Lane (ISN)

Poor Bertie. Poor, poor Bertie. Wouldn't your heart go out to him?

There he was in December 1993, barely scraping by in a crap job – a mere government minister...well, OK, the Minister for Finance – but, anyway, there he was with not a button to his name, other than a measly £50,000 in cash crammed into his office safe. I mean, things were so bad for the down and out of Fianna Fáil (do you remember that awful anorak he was forced to wear?) that he had to take out an unsecured...emm, yes, an *unsecured* loan of £19,115 from a friendly bank manager. So, when wealthy businessmen started stuffing tens of thousands of pounds into his pockets – for his private use, a badly needed 'dig-out', so to speak – what was a body to do?

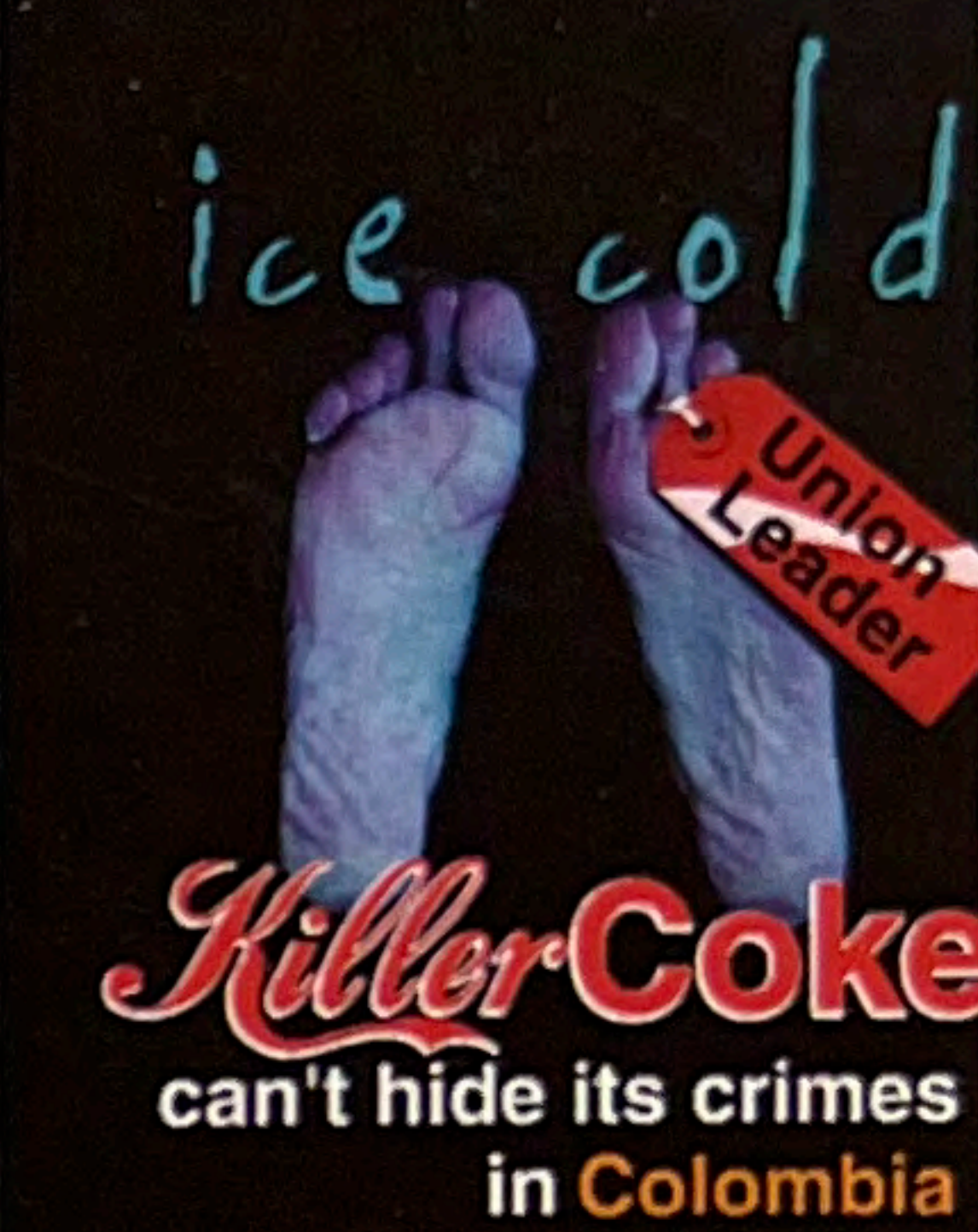
OK, let's slow down and look at that again. And

let's begin by remembering that the Irish pound of yore, even excluding the huge increase in the cost of living since then ('Tell me about it!' sez you), was worth considerably more than the euro of today. In fact, in 1993, you could have bought a very salubrious house with the £50,000 that Bertie the Bum allegedly saved between 1987 and 1993. Some savings too, you've got to admit, for a guy in choppy financial waters! Fair enough, he was on a handsome ministerial salary of roughly £35,000 per annum, a considerable wage for the time. Pause, though, to admire his dedication to saving: after tax, he had approximately £30,000 net income of which a very large chunk had to go to his separated wife, but, nonetheless, he was still able to squirrel away a more than goodly sum. Amazing! Even, dare we say it, unbelievable?

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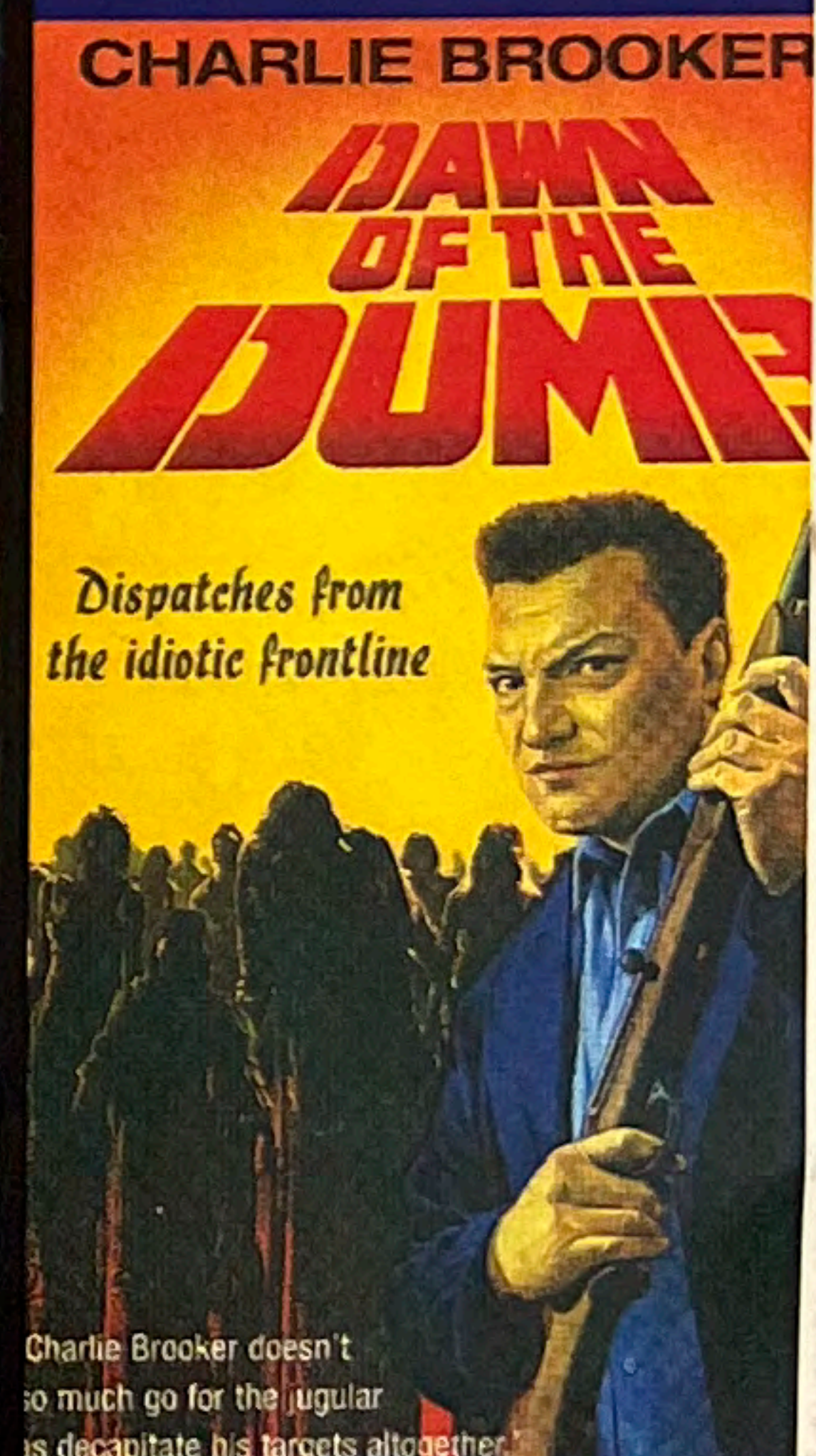
KillerCoke
can't hide its crimes
in Colombia

Campaign to Stop KillerCoke
www.KillerCoke.org
StopKillerCoke@aol.com

Death squads



Burst bubble



Charlie Brooker

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Bertie the Bum

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Anyway, between the jigs and the reels, according to evidence given at the Mahon tribunal by assistant bank manager Philip Murphy, Bertie Ahern was in a position to lodge £72,500 in cash – yep, in *cash* – to accounts at AIB on Upper O’Connell Street, Dublin, in an eight-month period between late December 1993 and early August 1994.

The fact that he had no bank account before this – the Minister for Finance! – has also raised a few eyebrows, but the rumour mill has discounted the importance of this. How many of you have heard it whispered in pubs and workplaces by supporters of Bertie the Bum that – nudge, nudge, wink, wink – he was making sure that his estranged wife (and dependent children) couldn’t get her greedy hands on his filthy lucre? Ah yes, and this explanation, if true, is supposed to cast Bertie in a good light. Dear oh dear. His marital separation was also mentioned as the reason for the ‘dig out’ in December 1993. But, let’s be blunt, this is nothing more than a crude attempt to throw dust in our eyes; his office safe was already bursting at the seams and, more to the point, he was separated for seven years by the time he was bunged £22,500 – chump change on Planet Bertie – by a group of businessmen at the end of 1993.

There can be no doubt but that Bertie Ahern has serious questions to answer in relation to his personal finances and regarding the nature and extent of the ‘dig outs’ he received from the business community. There is also the issue of his tax compliance. However, in truth, there is a wider story here that is receiving very little attention and it is of much greater importance than whether or not the Taoiseach is a dissembling liar and crook.

What this controversy has again highlighted is the cosy relationship between the political and economic elites in this country. The much-spoken about Fianna Fáil tent at the Galway Races is just the visible tip of an iceberg. Some time back TV3 broadcast an interview with Tony O’Reilly, originally done for US television, in which the owner of Independent Newspapers was asked why he didn’t ‘enter politics’ in Ireland; O’Reilly paused, as if puzzled by the foolishness of the question, before answering that he had! Understanding O’Reilly’s point, the interviewer rephrased his question to ask why he hadn’t run for election in Ireland,

to which O’Reilly replied that he didn’t have the time. He might have added that he didn’t need to.

During this interview, O’Reilly proved himself a promiscuous name-dropper, as he listed off the prime ministers, politicians and powerful figures who he hobnobs with and who seek his ‘advice’.

On a smaller scale, the tribunal hearings have revealed examples of employers gaining access to politicians in a way that your average working person never could. Take Noel C. Duggan, the Millstreet businessman. In March 1994, to boost his business fortunes, he was anxious to improve the roads to Millstreet in County Cork, so he attended a private Fianna Fáil fundraising dinner on the invitation of major property developer Owen O’Callaghan (he of Quarryvale fame), at which the guest of honour was then Taoiseach Albert Reynolds. The deal was that you bung Fianna Fáil a minimum of £5,000 and you get access to Reynolds’ sympathetic ear. Duggan recounted that his conversation with Reynolds that evening was ‘short and sweet.’

There is no even playing pitch. It is not even primarily a case of specific benefits granted or promised for cash, though this has undoubtedly happened (Dublin Councillor Tom Hand of Fine Gael and Ray Burke TD of Fianna Fáil are glaring examples). The real connection is the confluence of interests – a shared view of the world as a gravy train for a ruling elite. Look at Charlie Haughey. It is possible that Haughey did no direct favours for Ben Dunne in return for the huge sums of money that were handed over. But the question is less what Haughey did for the dosh than why rich businessmen bankroll right-wing politicians and political parties. And the answer is because, ideologically, they are on the same page; small and big businesses, understandably, tend to support political regimes that help them to increase their profits. The current Irish government, for example, is an advocate of privatisation – of flogging off, to the private sector, services that have been built up for decades with taxpayers’ money.

At the end of the day, the political elite in this country does not represent the interests of ordinary people. On the contrary, the state acts to protect and enhance the fortunes of the employers and business people – the ‘stake in the



country’ people. The self-employed farmers and farmer-employers were once an important part of this category but this has diminished as the social structure has changed.

The mental distance between parliamentary politicians and ordinary working people was highlighted in 2007 when they awarded themselves enormous pay rises, while most workers are getting a measly 2 to 3 per cent as inflation hovers around 5 per cent. Bertie Ahern’s pay increase, since postponed (but it will happen!), is a whopping €38,000, more than the average industrial wage and way above what many workers earn. Ahern’s earnings last year, including expenses, came to nearly €300,000. Likewise, your average TD gets almost €100,000.

With this sort of income – funded by the taxpayer – it’s no wonder that they feel more comfortable with, and empathetic towards, the business community. They are completely out of touch with the difficulties faced by ordinary workers. Politicians should be paid no more than the average wage of those they represent.

Ultimately, however, the real problem is systemic. Representative democracy – where we put a mark on a piece of paper every few years to elect full-time, non-recallable politicians – is not a very responsive system. We need to look at ways of creating a deeper form of democracy that ensures that the needs of people are the priority – a participatory democracy, with local and workplace councils, which sees the economy as subservient to society. Yes, this is certainly a long-term project, but we cannot continue to be governed for the benefit of the Tony O’Reillys, Owen O’Callaghans and Noel C. Duggans of this world. •

INDYMEDIA IRELAND

Independent news and postings, by activists and for activists. An indispensable resource. www.indymedia.ie

ANTI-WAR IRELAND

A national, democratic, non-hierarchical anti-war organisation in which the ISN participates. Can be contacted by emailing info@antiwarireland.org www.antiwarireland.org

IRISH ANTI-WAR MOVEMENT

Anti-war group that is active in opposing US imperialism in the Middle East. www.irishantiwar.org

IRELAND PALESTINE SOLIDARITY CAMPAIGN

It is what it says on the tin – a national and very active organisation for Palestine solidarity activists. www.ipsc.ie

HANDS OFF THE PEOPLE OF IRAN

A newly formed campaign that aims to mobilise people in opposition to US plans to attack Iran. Critical of the reactionary Iranian government. www.hopoi.org

CHOICE IRELAND

A campaign formed to advocate abortion rights in Ireland. Believes in a woman's right to choose. www.choiceireland.blogspot.com

SHELL TO SEA

Set up to support the people of Erris, Co. Mayo, in their struggle to fend off Shell's government-supported plans to build a dangerous gas pipeline in a scenic part of rural Ireland. Very active on a national basis. www.corribsos.com

RESIDENTS AGAINST RACISM

Dublin-based and long-standing anti-racism organisation that is particularly active in opposing government misbehaviour. A vibrant and committed group. www.residentsagainstracism.org

INDEPENDENT WORKERS UNION

A small union, containing many activists of a socialist disposition. Strongly opposed to social partnership, it organises particularly among lower-paid workers and immigrants. A campaigning, left-wing trade union. Headquarters is in Cork. www.union.ie

RED BANNER

An independent socialist magazine that has been produced regularly for the past 30 years. Always worth a read. www.redbannermagazine.com

HOUSING**Ireland's 'property boom' was all about greed**

By Kevin Quinn (ISN)

After a decade of house-price inflation, the Irish 'property boom' has dramatically come to an end. Eight interest hikes, Northern Rock's near collapse and the credit squeeze following on from the sub-prime lending crisis ensured the end of Ireland's house-price rollercoaster.

Ireland Inc. had hailed the 'property boom' as a national success story. Any serious analysis of the boom, however, reveals that the chief beneficiaries of the boom were the property developers, the lending institutions, the FF/PD/Green government, whose coffers were flooded with stamp duty and VAT receipts, and the print media whose advertising revenues soared from property advertising supplements. Indeed, the media played a key role in nurturing the purchasing frenzy, which characterised the boom period.

The media, together with a right-wing FF/PD coalition and our so-called mainstream economists and the property industry itself, set about propagating a market ideology for housing. Houses were to be commodified and traded on the market like any other commodity. The buzzwords of the boom period reflected this ideology. Newspapers talked about investment properties, buy to rent, house price appreciation, rental values, starter houses, property portfolios and holiday home investment.

The big buzzword, unsurprisingly, was the 'market'. The mystical market, when left to its own devices, would bring about price stabilisation. Only the forces of supply and demand could determine house prices. However, the property 'market' was a fiction. What existed was a cosy cartel of building magnates who monopolised the key market ingredient – land. As Ireland's population expanded through natural increase and inward migration, the demand for accommodation skyrocketed. To build houses, however, you need land and land is a finite resource. The developers who controlled the land surrounding our cities were the arbitrators of how much land was released

for housing. Excess demand for land increases its value significantly. Therefore, the developers drip fed land onto the market, ensuring high land prices and, as a corollary, high house prices. The decade-long housing boom did not witness any real price wars between developers.

So, the big losers in the property boom were the tens of thousands of working people who bought homes at artificially inflated prices. It is no coincidence that it was midway through the housing boom when both AIB and Bank of Ireland profits crashed through the billion mark.

The other big loser of the property boom was that section of the traditional working class who, whatever the economic climate, could not afford to buy a home. They were the non-story of the Celtic Tiger housing boom. In line with the FF/PD privatisation of housing policy, these people's housing needs have to be met by the private rented sector. Section 23 properties are replacing local authority housing as the only accommodation available to rent. Government and local authorities do not want to be in the business of providing homes for its citizens in any meaningful way.

As we approach the end of the first decade of the 21st century, hopes of an alternative non-market driven housing policy, based on people needs and viewing the provision of housing to its citizens as a social good, seems a distant pipe dream. The housing system we have inherited is the legacy of the domination of Irish politics by the right-wing Fianna Fáil party and this party's strategic alliance with the construction industry, which dates back to the 1930s. The real history of this alliance will not be found in the records of the Dáil debates or in the planning acts, but, possibly, in the transcripts of the Mahon tribunal's reports on corruption in the Irish planning process.

In the meantime, we have to get back to asserting that housing is a social right and houses are not simply commodities in the marketplace. •

Government planning an attack on lone parents

By John O'Neill (ISN)

The government is planning to force lone parents to make themselves available for work as a condition for receiving payments – an outrageous proposal that will cause unnecessary hardship for their families. While the exact details are vague, the government wants to make it 'obligatory' for lone parents to seek employment or training, following the example of programmes in Britain and the US that have forced countless lone parents into dead-end, minimum-wage jobs.

There are an estimated 80,000 lone parents in the Republic in receipt of the one-parent family payment, and research indicates that there has been an alarming increase in poverty for one-parent families. While overall rates of consistent poverty remained almost unchanged from 2005 to 2006, consistent poverty among single parents went up significantly: from 27.2 to 32.5 per cent.

They are now four and half times more likely than anyone else to live in poverty. One-parent families are defined as being 'at risk of poverty' where the household income is below €282.83 per week, but lone parents relying on social welfare have to get by on just €248.18 a week. Reliance on such low incomes means that, for example, almost one in five families (18.8 per cent) are in debt just trying to meet ordinary living expenses; a similar proportion (18.1 per cent) had to go without heating at some stage in the last year.

The latest government proposal suggests that a single parent would be obliged to take up education, training or employment once their youngest child reaches seven or eight years of age. Then, over a four-year period, the parental allowance would be tapered off to act as an 'incentive' to seek a job. After this, the parent still on welfare would move on to unemployment benefit, which is paid on condition that you are actively seeking work or in full-time education. This is a stark departure from the current situation where the One Parent Family

Payment is paid to all lone parents as a universal entitlement. Every lone parent is entitled to receive the payment until their child reaches the age of 18 – or older if they remain in full-time education.

Everyone with a connection to a lone parent will know that any job they consider has to coincide with school terms, or allow them to access after-school services for their children. Yet, there is very little after-school care available, and what *is* available tends to be so costly that it makes working an uneconomical option. In the last 10 years, there has been a significant increase in the provision of childcare places (with demand still far exceeding availability). But the government has chosen not to invest in pre-school state provision – huge amounts of money have been poured into grants for 'private providers' who are charging exorbitant weekly rates that deny people in receipt of the average industrial wage access to child care. Communities have had to

organise their own non-profit crèches.

As for training and educational opportunities for lone parents, there would have to be radical change to enable their participation. With the exception of community employment (a partnership with non-profit community service providers to prepare unemployed people for work), all FÁS courses are full-time. Second-chance education is only grant-aided if the student is in full-time education.

Until these barriers are removed, claims that employment can offer a way out of poverty for single parents will be hollow. Research conducted by OPEN (the national network of lone parent organisations) shows that a lone parent with one child can drop 42 per cent of their welfare income by moving to a 40-hour minimum-wage job.

It is shocking to see that the representative groups for lone parents have remained largely silent and failed to mobilise opposition to the government's plan. Lone parent organisations seem to be afraid of losing state funding if they step out of line. That's another bitter fruit of 'social partnership' for working-class communities in Ireland. •

WHAT WE STAND FOR

The Irish Socialist Network is a radical democratic socialist organisation, committed to the complete abolition of capitalism and its replacement by a socialist society, by which we mean:

- A transformation of power relationships, leading to democratic control of all aspects of society and an end to elite rule.
- Collective ownership and democratic control of all economic structures, wealth and resources, by the working class.
- Equality of all people and an end to all forms of privilege and discrimination.
- Vindication of all human rights: social, political and individual.
- A sustainable society, developing in harmony with the natural environment.

The Irish Socialist Network works to achieve this society on the basis of the following principles:

- Change is brought about by the empowerment of ordinary people not by a revolutionary vanguard or parliamentary elite.
- Openness, equality, internal democracy, consistent activism and a commitment to class politics are essential traits of a socialist organisation.
- Non-dogmatic Marxist thought is essential for analysing society and advancing the struggle for socialism.
- While acknowledging differences, we will work in a non-sectarian manner with, and promote dialogue between, all socialist and progressive organisations.
- A key component of socialism is internationalism in the struggle for justice, equality and the defence of the environment.

If you are interested in joining the ISN, email us at irishsocialistnetwork@dublin.ie



Should socialists be in the Labour Party?

YES

By Paul Dillon (Labour Party)

One thing that those in the organised left can agree on is the need for a political party to represent the interests of working people. This was the starting point for the founders of the Irish Labour Party and the starting point for similar parties all over the industrialised world, which were formed as the voting franchise was extended.

In recent times, some of the left groups in Ireland have gone much further than recognising the need for such a party and have engaged in attempts to build them. The first such attempt was the Campaign for an Independent Left (CIL), which the Irish Socialist Network was involved in. Indeed, the ISN was the first group to pull out of the CIL. Despite a reasonably large number of activists and a strong degree of political determination from those involved, the campaign to establish a new party floundered in under a year.

The Socialist Workers' Party (SWP) is currently involved in an effort to build the People Before Profit Alliance (PBP). However, some on the left are hesitant to get involved and there is little proof that the organisation has been able to extend beyond the SWP. This point aside, the unwinding of the Respect coalition in the UK, a similar vehicle to PBP, does not bode well for the future of People Before Profit here.

This leaves the Socialist Party, who argue that the time is not right for the launch of any new party.

The prospects then for the formation

of a new party of the left are not great at all. And any party that is formed would need to be broadly based and encompass a wide range of views and ideas – rather like the Irish Labour Party today.

Even if the process of forming a new party were to be successful, and there is no evidence at the present time to suggest that it can be, it would be likely to take decades. There would be no guarantee that such a party would not face the same problems as Labour does today.

For as long as there has been a Labour Party in Ireland, there have been left wingers in it. Indeed, it is a historical fact that much of the progress that the Labour Party has made down through the decades has been a consequence of initiatives taken at grassroots level rather than at the level of the leadership. Labour grew rapidly in Dublin during the 1940s, mainly as a consequence of work undertaken by the Larkinites on trade union issues. Equally, the periods of growth in the 1960s and late 1980s were the consequence of strategies agreed by the grassroots and owed much to the organised left within the party.

It is a foolhardy exercise then to claim that the left can have no influence within the Irish Labour Party today, or that party members cannot seize the party's agenda, when such work is not just a feature of the party's history, but has been responsible for some of the party's most significant advances. So, there are plenty of reasons for people on the left to continue to see the Labour Party as an appropriate vehicle to transform society. •

Paul Dillon is a member of the national executive committee of the Labour Party.

NO

By Colm Breathnach (ISN)

Despite the sincere efforts of a number of activists, the arguments in favour of working within the Labour Party just don't stack up.

A quick glance at the history of the party reveals that it has always been cautious in the extreme. The aftermath of Larkin's return to the party 1940s is instructive. In 1948, Labour joined a coalition government, failed to push through any serious reforms and backed the attack on the only radical minister, Noel Browne. The strategy of winning the party for the left has always failed. Reliance on left-leaning figures such as Michael D. Higgins and Eric Byrne has proved hopeless. The radical rhetoric of such individuals has never matched their actions. Despite their best intentions, socialists have never transformed Labour, but Labour has often transformed socialists!

The hopelessness of the situation in Labour is symbolised by the fact that advocating coalition with Fianna Fáil rather than being tied to Fine Gael is now seen as a left-wing position. Of course, Labour has never rejected an offer of coalition and entry into government at any cost is the only principle it has clung to with consistency over the years.

Labour, as a party, has been actively hostile to many grassroots struggles, such as the anti-service charges campaigns and EU referendums. It is currently campaigning for the Lisbon Treaty, as is Labour Youth. Individual members, especially from Labour Youth, have



BENCHMARKING DEBACLE

'Social partnership' sell-out

played a role in campaigns such as Shell to Sea while the cautious leadership wriggles to avoid taking a stance for fear of frightening middle-class voters.

There are many structural reasons why it has proved impossible to transform Labour. It is a standard mainstream party dominated by its TDs and coun-

Alvaro Uribe and the death squads in Colombia

By Ed Walsh (ISN)

There's been a lot of anxious talk about political developments in Venezuela lately. The now-defeated proposal to abolish presidential term limits, which would have allowed Hugo Chavez to stand for another term, prompted many warnings that the South American nation was well on its way towards dictatorship. Those expressing concern about the health of Venezuela's political process might want to spare a little anxiety for neighbouring Colombia, where the evidence of intimate collaboration between the government of Alvaro Uribe and paramilitary death squads is now overwhelming.

Like Chavez, Uribe decided that he wanted to change the law so that he could run for another term. Unlike Chavez, he was in no mood to consult the people about the change – instead of holding a referendum, Uribe's supporters pushed it through the Colombian parliament. When Uribe stood for re-election in 2006, more than half the electorate abstained. The right-wing death squads issued a statement on the eve of the vote, warning that they would greet a victory for Uribe's left-wing challenger with murderous violence: 'We will not permit a different result. If, on Sunday, the yellow shirts are in the majority, we will take care of dyeing them a different colour: blood red! This is our declaration of total war. All who do not accept the legitimacy of El Senor Presidente Alvaro Uribe Velez will be our next military target.'

Few Colombians would take such threats lightly. In the past decade, the paramilitaries have killed thousands of civilians. They have murdered trade unionists and peasant leaders, human rights defenders and peace activists. Anyone who challenges the imposition of an especially brutal form of neo-liberalism on Colombia is considered a fair target. The paramilitaries often use sadistic violence to terrorise the population, hacking people to death with machetes or chain-saws.

There has always been a close relationship between the Colombian state and the death squads. Without the tolerance and encouragement of the regular army, the paramilitary killers would find it very difficult to function. This collaboration has been documented in abundant detail by groups like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. But it has reached new peaks under the presidency of Alvaro Uribe, who earned himself the nickname 'Mr Killer' during his spell as president.

BOOK REVIEW

Satire with an edge

By Ed Walsh (ISN)

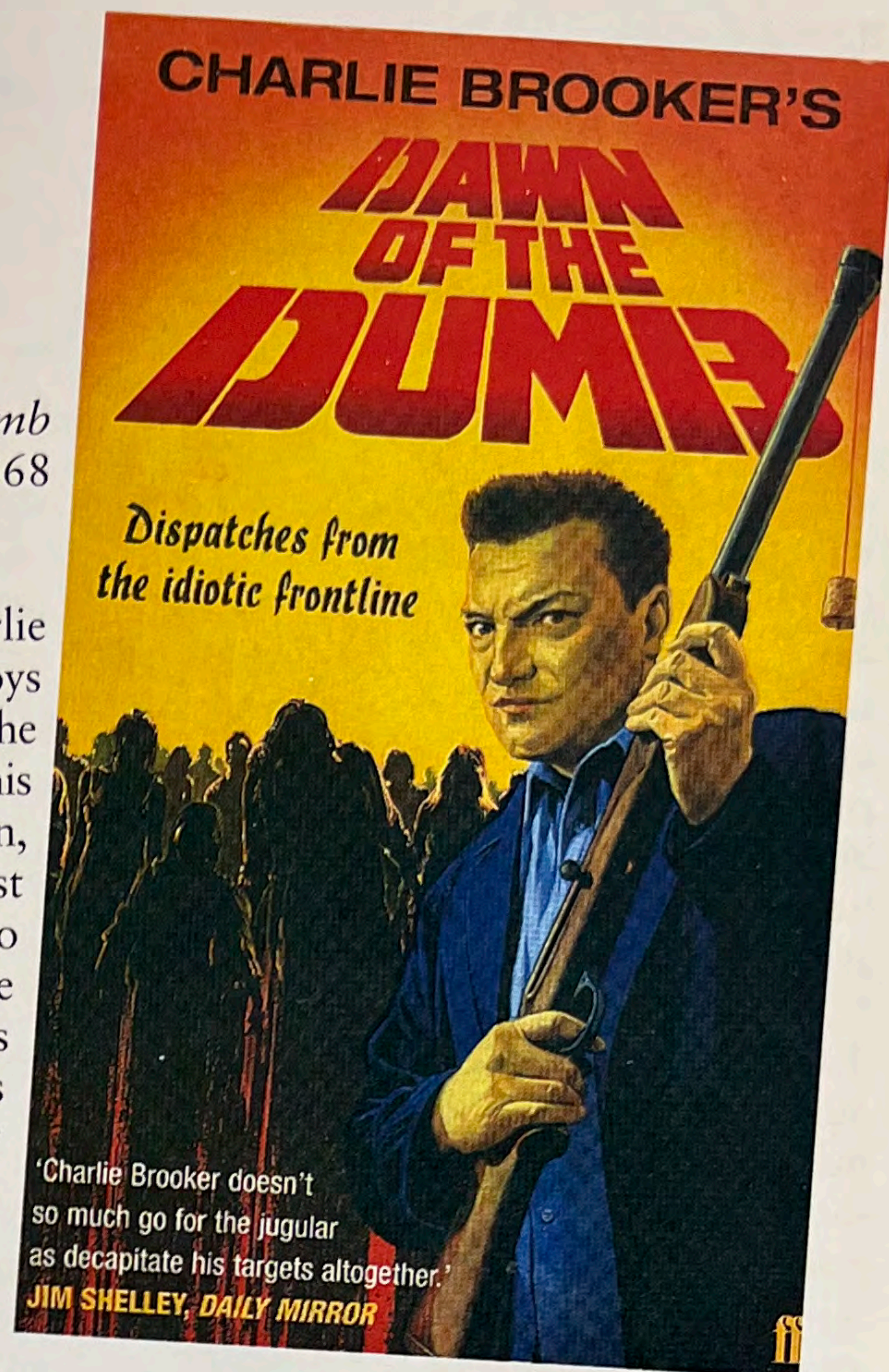
Charlie Brooker, *Dawn of the Dumb* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), 368 pages, paperback, €14.99.

For the past several years, Charlie Brooker has been one of the hidden joys of the British press: tucked away in the *Guardian's* weekend TV supplement, his gloriously vitriolic column, Screen Burn, has delivered some of the funniest journalism in the English language (no more than you'd expect from the writing partner of Chris Morris). This is the second collection of Brooker's *Guardian* articles, and for my money it's as good a skewering of modern Anglophone culture as you'll find.

Now, it's only fair to note that Brooker himself disclaims any direct political agenda: at one point he argues that 'the best satire floats somewhere in the centre – not in a non-committal sense, but a tactical one: positioned between the two sides, you're capable of lashing out in either direction.' With that in mind, it's no surprise to find him delivering such a damning verdict on George Galloway's appearance on *Celebrity Big Brother*: 'It's hard to think of anything worse he could've done during his stay in the house. But I'll have a go. He could have 1) masturbated repeatedly on camera, staring the viewer straight in the eye; 2) pooped into a big bowl of flour in the middle of the kitchen; and 3) killed at least nine of his fellow house-mates.'

You'll find, though, that Brooker has far more to say against the gougers at the other end of the political spectrum (they're the ones with the power to screw things up properly, after all). After Tony Blair plays himself in a sketch for *Comic Relief*, our reviewer is effusive in his praise: 'For a second, I guffawed so loudly I almost forgot about the teetering stacks of skulls, the foaming geysers of blood, the phosphor burns, the pictures of young children with their arms blown off, and the constant metronomic background tick-tock of lie upon lie upon lie upon lie.'

The elevation of David Cameron to the leadership of the Conservative Party, and his love-in with the British media, inspires a lengthy rant about the young toff and his ilk: 'In descending order of vehemence, my objections to the Tory species stem from a) everything they do,



b) everything they say, c) everything they stand for, d) how they look, e) their stupid names and f) the noises I imagine they make in bed.'

Most of what he writes has little to do with politics in the conventional sense. But Brooker has a sharp eye for what the most trivial scraps from the culture industries tell us about the times we're living through. After describing a Sky magazine with a stupefying moronic system that places tiny celebrity faces beside each movie to let people know what they're getting (Brad Pitt meaning 'Eye Candy', Christopher Lee meaning 'Scary', and so on), he reflects that 'our leaders lie, and we know they have lied, and there is war in our name, and the world kicks and boils itself to death and we do nothing but stare into the tiny grinning faces of people we don't even know; faces that are, apparently, more 'fast, easy and practical' than language itself. I give us six years, tops.'

The Left doesn't think about this stuff half as much as it should do, and you could find no better starting point than this book. It's all here, from the degeneration of 24 into raving neo-con propaganda to the class snobbery that explains the popularity of Jamie Oliver's healthy-eating campaign ('isn't it simply terrible, what these blobsome plebs do to themselves? Nor our Josh, you understand: he eats nothing but organic spinach and attends lacrosse practice six hundred times a week'). Buy it now. •

A ROUGH GUIDE TO SOCIALISM

Trade unions

forgotten the need for solidarity in the

'Social partnership' sell-out under pressure

By John Lally (ISN)

The Second Benchmarking Report is the latest blow to the trade union bureaucracy's pro-partnership consensus. Indeed, the fallout from the report has revealed deep divisions among the public sector unions. The Irish Nurses Organisation (INO) and the Psychiatric Nurses Association (PNA) feel that they have been left hang out to dry by what they describe as the 'favoured' public sector unions. Most members of the INO and PNA got a big fat increase of zero from Benchmarking 2. And this despite the fact that, as part of the settlement of their work-to-rule in the summer of 2007, the National Implementation Body (NIB) recommended that they process their claim for pay parity with other healthcare professionals, such as physiotherapists, through Benchmarking.

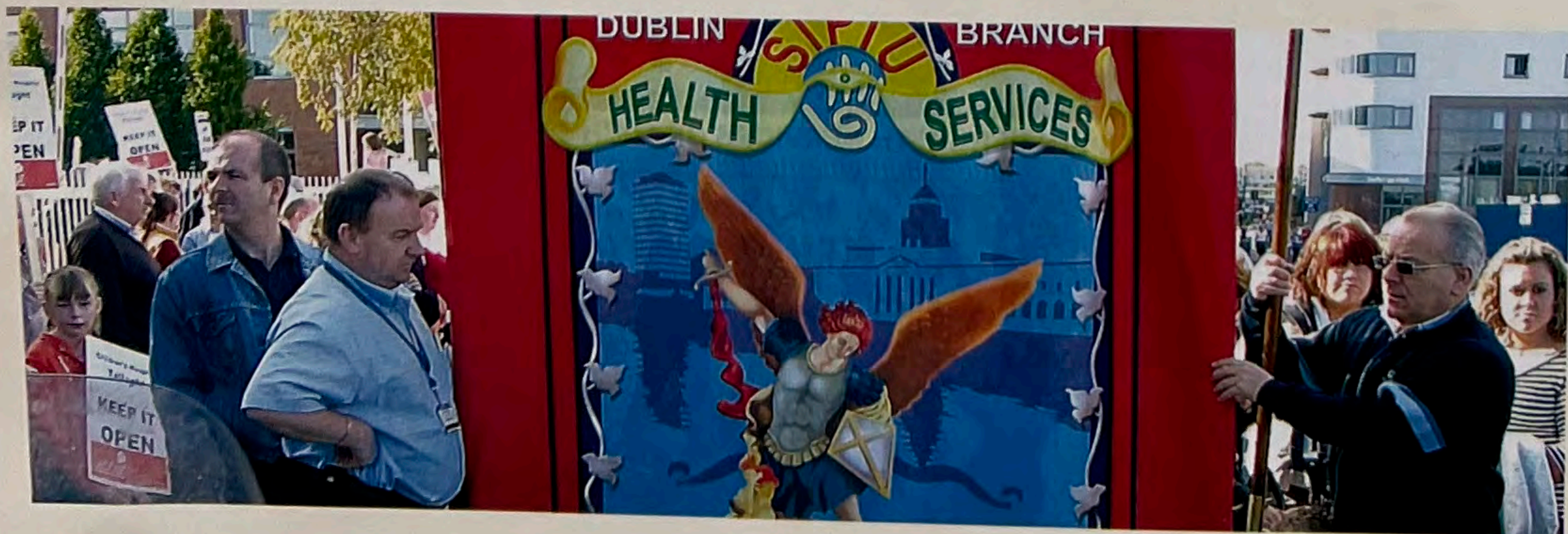
The Benchmarking Body, however, then said that this claim was outside its terms of reference, leaving the leadership of the nursing unions looking silly in front of their members. Socialists won't shed any tears over the public embarrassment of well-paid trade union leaders. What concerns us much, much more is the pay and conditions of nurses who do the front-line work in our health services. Most nurses got nothing out of Benchmarking 2. These are people who work shifts and weekends, who care for the old and sick in society, and yet Benchmarking 2 chose to reward some senior managers with 5 and 10 per cent increases, while leaving nurses on poor rates of pay.

The injustice of Benchmarking 2 may yet lead to a total re-evaluation of 'social partnership' by ordinary union members. There were few pay increases under Benchmarking 2, but of those that did get increases, most were already well-paid senior staff. And down the years of the partnership process, percentage increases have been the norm. It doesn't take a genius to work out that this has led to a widening of the gap between the higher paid managers and the frontline basic grade workers.

The jibe of 'favoured' public sector union was used by the nurses' union leaders to have a go at IMPACT, which is the largest public sector union and represents mostly clerical/administrative grades in the local government and health sectors. A large part of that membership is made up of clerical officers and similar basic grades on comparatively low wages. These people also received a big fat zero under Benchmarking 2. Yet, the leadership of IMPACT is strongly pro-partnership. This leadership seems to be content to win increases for its senior management grade members and, more importantly from its point of view, to remain inside the partnership tent come what may, so that these well-paid union big shots can have the ear of Bertie and Brian and the other leaders of this anti-worker, pro-privatisation government.

We need to focus on how we address these issues. It's not a case of good or bad public sector unions. Our loyalty is to the working class and specifically, in this case, that huge swathe of public sector workers – members of the INO, PNA, IMPACT, CPSU and other unions – who are on low to middle incomes. These people are the victims of a system that sees high-paid senior managers, high-paid full-time union officials and the government joined in a golden circle cabal – where they win, and real, front-line workers lose.

It may be that within the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, the INO, PNA and CPSU (representing low-paid civil servants) will seek to make common cause with anti-partnership private sector unions such as ATGWU/UNITE and MANDATE. The challenge for socialists is not to walk away from this mess created by the union bureaucrats, but to engage with ordinary union members and to expose the rip-off that 'partnership' has been for them. And to work with them in wresting control of their unions from the overpaid bureaucrats who have sold them and whatever principles they once had down the 'social partnership' river. •



gies to avoid taking a stance for fear of frightening middle-class voters.

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To achieve this, we need to build an anti-capitalist movement from below. Inevitably, building such a movement will be difficult. Yes, some recent attempts in Ireland and elsewhere have been unsuccessful, though much of this is due to the actions of authoritarian groupings, and a reliance on prominent personalities. Where these factors have not been significant, there have been significant breakthroughs: for example, the LCR in France, and the Left Bloc in Portugal.

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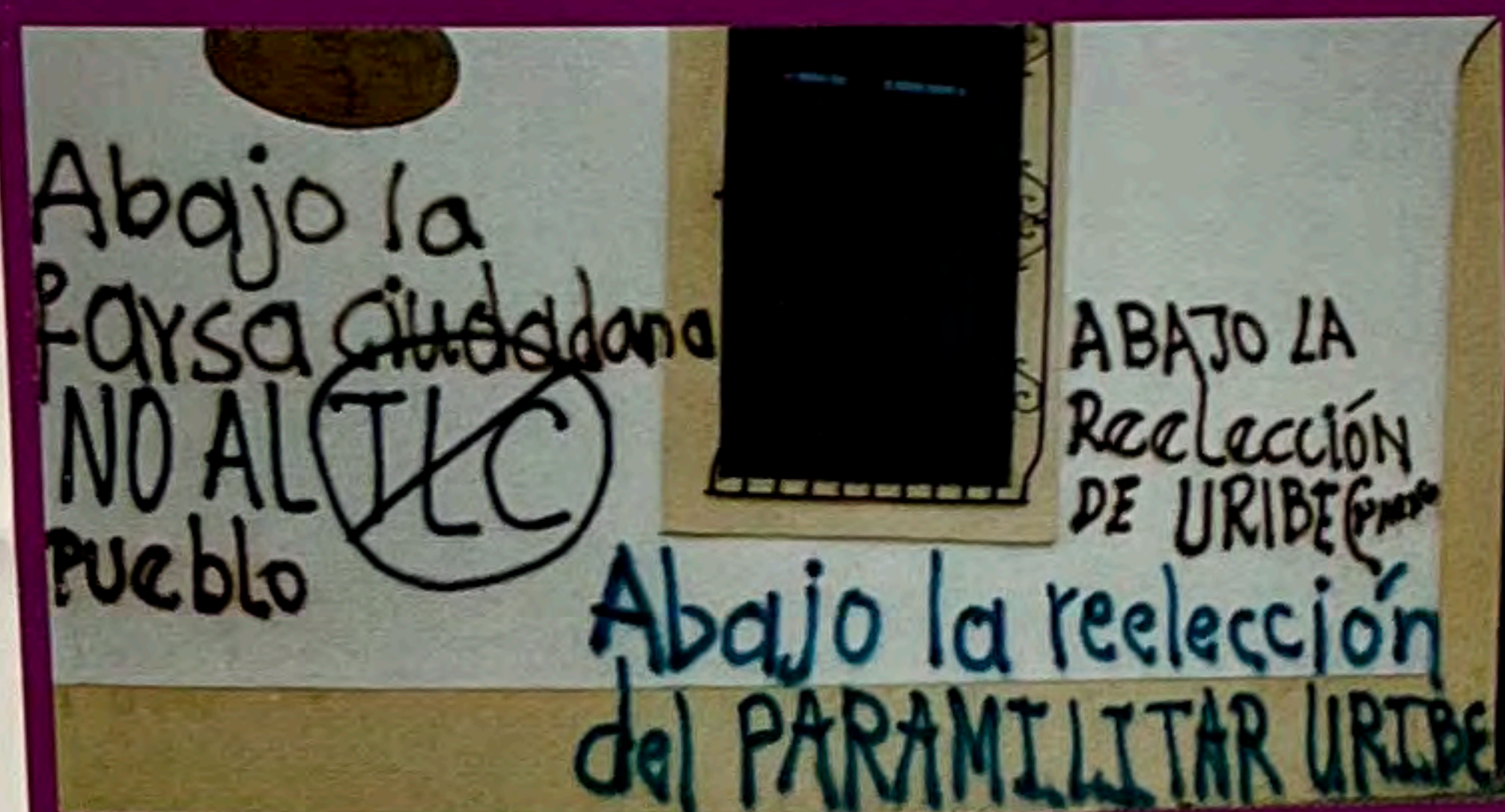
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Investigations by Colombian magistrates have now uncovered links between the current administration and the paramilitaries reaching as far as the highest levels. Uribe's foreign minister was forced to resign after her senator brother was arrested because of his paramilitary ties. Another scandal has implicated Jorge Noguera, appointed by Uribe to head Colombia's intelligence services. Noguera was arrested when it emerged that he had been passing the details of trade union members – including their security arrangements – to the paramilitaries for targeting.

Noguera ran Uribe's election campaign in the Magdalena province in 2002, and the president was quick to defend him at first, calling him 'an uncontaminated man and good person'. The power-holders in Washington would probably rush to say the same about Uribe: no matter how many bodies stack up under his rule, they will continue supporting him to the hilt as long as he provides a useful bulwark against the rise of progressive movements across Latin America. •

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A ROUGH GUIDE TO SOCIALISM

Trade unions

By Fintan Lane (ISN)

On Saturday, 11 August 1764, a weaver called John Dinane (probably 'Dineen') was brought by the forces of 'law and order' to the South Gate Bridge in Cork and savagely whipped through the Main Street of the city. He was then thrown in the jail at the northern end of the street to recover before being similarly whipped on two subsequent market days. Dinane was lucky. In 1773, two rope-makers were publicly hanged in the city for a similar offence.

And what terrible 'offence' did Dinane and the two forgotten rope-makers commit? They engaged in industrial action and were involved in organising a union. In fact, Dinane was only one of numerous workers whipped through the streets of Cork and elsewhere in Ireland for daring to demand proper pay and conditions from their employers. Many pioneer trade unionists, whose names are now lost to us, were also executed.

Despite such repression – and the outright banning of unions under the Combination Acts – Irish workers continued to organise in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. At times, they fought fire with fire – in the early 1830s, for example, sulphuric acid was thrown in the faces of several Cork employers and strike-breakers, causing blindness and disfigurement. Desperate times (unemployment meant starvation) sometimes led to desperate measures.

Trade unions were decriminalised in 1824, but they still faced much resistance from employers and the state as they organised and expanded through the 19th century. Many workers, however, put their hearts and souls into building up trade unions because they understood that without collective action and solidarity they would be at the mercy of employers who prioritised profit over the welfare of workers. The only people willing to protect the workers from super-exploitation were the workers themselves. In solidarity was strength.

This all seems a world away from the unions of today. Many workers, especially in the private sector, now prefer to look to the state or the legal profession for protection and one often hears cynical remarks about the trade union movement, even from some on the left. It appears, at times, as if people have

forgotten the need for solidarity in the workplace.

The ISN has no illusions about the current trade union movement. From the outset, the unions had limitations. Most importantly, and despite the efforts of syndicalists later on, trade unions have always been primarily defence organisations. Yes, on occasion, they have engaged in widespread militant action against employers and, in some instances, against the state, but they are not naturally revolutionary bodies and the full-time leadership tends towards conservatism with a small 'c'. The extent of their involvement in leftist political action is normally determined by a wider context – by the intensity of class struggle at a given time – and not by an innate inclination towards political radicalism.

Most trade unions in Ireland today are run by highly paid, full-time officials who fear rank-and-file organisation and industrial action. These bureaucrats prefer the easy life given to them by the so-called 'social partnership' deals, while the workers they represent take a cut in real pay, as inflation climbs. In fact, the 'social partnership' agreements with the bosses and the state have directly weakened rank-and-file trade unionism, as we are told to leave everything to the top union bosses to negotiate. The ISN opposes the appointment of full-time, overpaid union officials because we believe that this layer of bureaucrats is always likely to act conservatively and to compromise unnecessarily with employers.

However, with a serious economic slow-down looming, the cosy 'social partnership' deal could be severely undermined. In such a context, the rank-and-file union members might find themselves in a strong position to weaken the grip of the bureaucrats at the top and to reassert the need for militancy in the face of ongoing attempts to weaken our conditions of employment.

Finally, it is clear that collective action remains as essential as it was when John Dinane was whipped through the streets for daring to demand his rights. If unions did not exist – or if workers opt not to join them – then the employers will do what they can to widen their margin of profit. Wages will drop and conditions of employment will be eroded. Only through collective action can we halt and reverse such trends.

If you are not currently in a trade union, then join one. Workplace solidarity is as necessary now as it was in 1764. •

Should socialists be in the Labour Party?

ES

Paul Dillon (Labour Party)
The thing that those in the organised left agree on is the need for a political party to represent the interests of working people. This was the starting point for the founders of the Irish Labour Party and the starting point for similar parties over the industrialised world, which were formed as the voting franchise was extended.

In recent times, some of the left groups in Ireland have gone much further than recognising the need for such a party and have engaged in attempts to build them. The first such attempt was the Campaign for an Independent Left (CIL), which the Irish Socialist Network was involved in. Indeed, the ISN was the first group to pull out of the CIL. Despite a reasonably large number of activists and a strong degree of political determination from those involved, the campaign to establish a new party floundered in under a year.

The Socialist Workers' Party (SWP) is currently involved in an effort to build the People Before Profit Alliance (PBP). However, some on the left are hesitant to get involved and there is little proof that the organisation has been able to extend beyond the SWP. This point aside, the unwinding of the Respect coalition in the UK, a similar vehicle to PBP, does not bode well for the future of People Before Profit here.

This leaves the Socialist Party, who argue that the time is not right for the launch of any new party.

The prospects then for the formation

of a new party of the left are not great at all. And any party that is formed would need to be broadly based and encompass a wide range of views and ideas – rather like the Irish Labour Party today.

Even if the process of forming a new party were to be successful, and there is no evidence at the present time to suggest that it can be, it would be likely to take decades. There would be no guarantee that such a party would not face the same problems as Labour does today.

For as long as there has been a Labour Party in Ireland, there have been left wingers in it. Indeed, it is a historical fact that much of the progress that the Labour Party has made down through the decades has been a consequence of initiatives taken at grassroots level rather than at the level of the leadership. Labour grew rapidly in Dublin during the 1940s, mainly as a consequence of work undertaken by the Larkinites on trade union issues. Equally, the periods of growth in the 1960s and late 1980s were the consequence of strategies agreed by the grassroots and owed much to the organised left within the party.

It is a foolhardy exercise then to claim that the left can have no influence within the Irish Labour Party today, or that party members cannot seize the party's agenda, when such work is not just a feature of the party's history, but has been responsible for some of the party's most significant advances. So, there are plenty of reasons for people on the left to continue to see the Labour Party as an appropriate vehicle to transform society. •

Paul Dillon is a member of the national executive committee of the Labour Party.



A parliamentary road to socialism?

BENCHMARKING DEBACLE

'Social partnership' sell-out under pressure

By John Lally (ISN)

The Second Benchmarking Report is the latest blow to the trade union bureaucracy's pro-partnership consensus. Indeed, the fallout from the report has revealed deep divisions among the public sector unions. The Irish Nurses Organisation (INO) and the Psychiatric Nurses Association (PNA) feel that they have been left hanging out to dry by what they describe as the 'favoured' public sector unions. Most members of the INO and PNA got a big fat increase of zero from Benchmarking 2. And this despite the fact that, as part of the settlement of their work-to-rule in the summer of 2007, the National Implementation Body (NIB) recommended that they process their claim for pay parity with other healthcare professionals, such as physiotherapists, through Benchmarking.

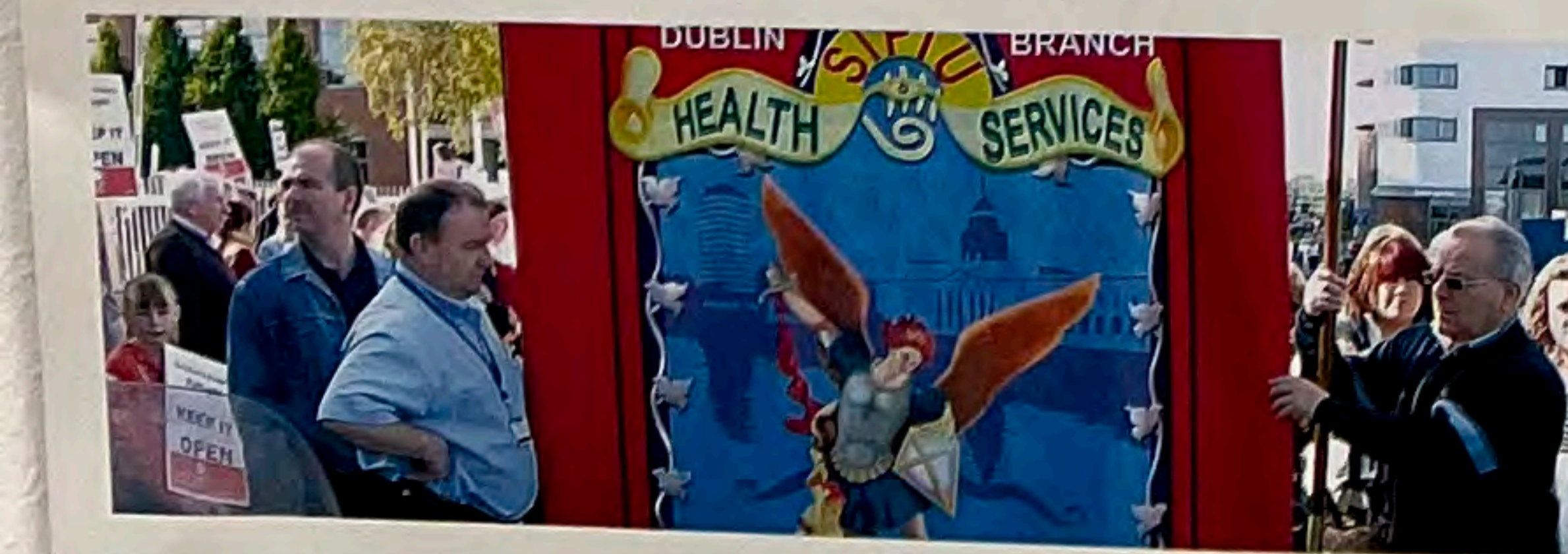
The Benchmarking Body, however, then said that this claim was outside its terms of reference, leaving the leadership of the nursing unions looking silly in front of their members. Socialists won't shed any tears over the public embarrassment of well-paid trade union leaders. What concerns us much, much more is the pay and conditions of nurses who do the frontline work in our health services. Most nurses got nothing out of Benchmarking 2. These are people who work shifts and weekends, who care for the old and sick in society, and yet Benchmarking 2 chose to reward some senior managers with 5 and 10 per cent increases, while leaving nurses on poor rates of pay.

The injustice of Benchmarking 2 may yet lead to a total re-evaluation of 'social partnership' by ordinary union members. There were few pay increases under Benchmarking 2, but of those that did get increases, most were already well-paid senior staff. And down the years of the partnership process, percentage increases have been the norm. It doesn't take a genius to work out that this has led to a widening of the gap between the higher paid managers and the frontline basic grade workers.

The jibe of 'favoured' public sector union was used by the nurses' union leaders to have a go at IMPACT, which is the largest public sector union and represents mostly clerical/administrative grades in the local government and health sectors. A large part of that membership is made up of clerical officers and similar basic grades on comparatively low wages. These people also received a big fat zero under Benchmarking 2. Yet, the leadership of IMPACT is strongly pro-partnership. This leadership seems to be content to win increases for its senior management grade members and, more importantly from its point of view, to remain inside the partnership tent come what may, so that these well-paid union big shots can have the ear of Bertie and Brian and the other leaders of this anti-worker, pro-privatisation government.

We need to focus on how we address these issues. It's not a case of good or bad public sector unions. Our loyalty is to the working class and specifically, in this case, that huge swathe of public sector workers – members of the INO, PNA, IMPACT, CPSU and other unions – who are on low to middle incomes. These people are the victims of a system that sees high-paid senior managers, high-paid full-time union officials and the government joined in a golden circle cabal – where they win, and real, frontline workers lose.

It may be that within the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, the INO, PNA and CPSU (representing low-paid civil servants) will seek to make common cause with anti-partnership private sector unions such as ATGWU/UNITE and MANDATE. The challenge for socialists is not to walk away from this mess created by the union bureaucrats, but to engage with ordinary union members and to expose the rip-off that 'partnership' has been for them. And to work with them in wresting control of their unions from the overpaid bureaucrats who have sold them and whatever principles they once had down the 'social partnership' river. •



DUBLIN BRANCH

NO

By Colm Breathnach (ISN)
Despite the sincere efforts of a number of activists, the arguments in favour of working within the Labour Party just don't stack up.

A quick glance at the history of the party reveals that it has always been cautious in the extreme. The aftermath of Larkin's return to the party 1940s is instructive. In 1948, Labour joined a coalition government, failed to push through any serious reforms and backed the attack on the only radical minister, Noel Browne. The strategy of winning the party for the left has always failed. Reliance on left-leaning figures such as Michael D. Higgins and Eric Byrne has proved hopeless. The radical rhetoric of such individuals has never matched their actions. Despite their best intentions, socialists have never transformed Labour, but Labour has often transformed socialists!

The hopelessness of the situation in Labour is symbolised by the fact that advocating coalition with Fianna Fáil rather than being tied to Fine Gael is now seen as a left-wing position. Of course, Labour has never rejected an offer of coalition and entry into government at any cost is the only principle it has clung to with consistency over the years.

Labour, as a party, has been actively hostile to many grassroots struggles, such as the anti-service charges campaigns and EU referendums. It is currently campaigning for the Lisbon Treaty, as is Labour Youth. Individual members, especially from Labour Youth, have



Mass action the way to socialism

played a role in campaigns such as Shell to Sea while the cautious leadership wriggles to avoid taking a stance for fear of frightening middle-class voters.

There are many structural reasons why it has proved impossible to transform Labour. It is a standard mainstream party dominated by its TDs and councillors. It is an electoral machine not a campaigning movement. It is linked to working people's lives largely by the clientalism of its elected reps. It is tied to the conservative union bureaucracy and its social base is primarily made up of middle and upper sections of the working population as well as 'professionals'.

It is correct to say that it would be foolish to try to build an alternative, left-wing Labour Party. But that is *not* what the ISN advocates. We do not see a transformation of society as occurring through electing socialists to parliament who will then introduce reforms from above. This strategy is based on an unproblematic view of the state as a neutral structure that can be used to bring about radical reforms, but being in office is not the same as being in power. The evidence is overwhelmingly against this strategy. Social democratic governments have been repeatedly elected on radical platforms only to dilute or abandon them and, in many cases, to become able administrators of neo-liberalism. Look at the Labour Party in Britain!

In reality, the power of the ruling class is articulated in all spheres of life, not just via the various structures of the state. The goal of democratic revolutionary socialists is to establish popular power from the bottom up and to create alternative institutions of participatory power, a transformation to a society where working people democratically and collectively control all economic, social and cultural structures.

To achieve this, we need to build an anti-capitalist movement from below. Inevitably, building such a movement will be difficult. Yes, some recent attempts in Ireland and elsewhere have been unsuccessful, though much of this is due to the actions of authoritarian groupings, and a reliance on prominent personalities. Where these factors have not been significant, there have been significant breakthroughs: for example, the LCR in France, and the Left Bloc in Portugal.

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Alvaro Uribe and the death squads in Colombia

By Ed Walsh (ISN)

There's been a lot of anxious talk about political developments in Venezuela lately. The now-defeated proposal to abolish presidential term limits, which would have allowed Hugo Chavez to stand for another term, prompted many warnings that the South American nation was well on its way towards dictatorship. Those expressing concern about the health of Venezuela's political process might want to spare a little anxiety for neighbouring Colombia, where the evidence of intimate collaboration between the government of Alvaro Uribe and paramilitary death squads is now overwhelming.

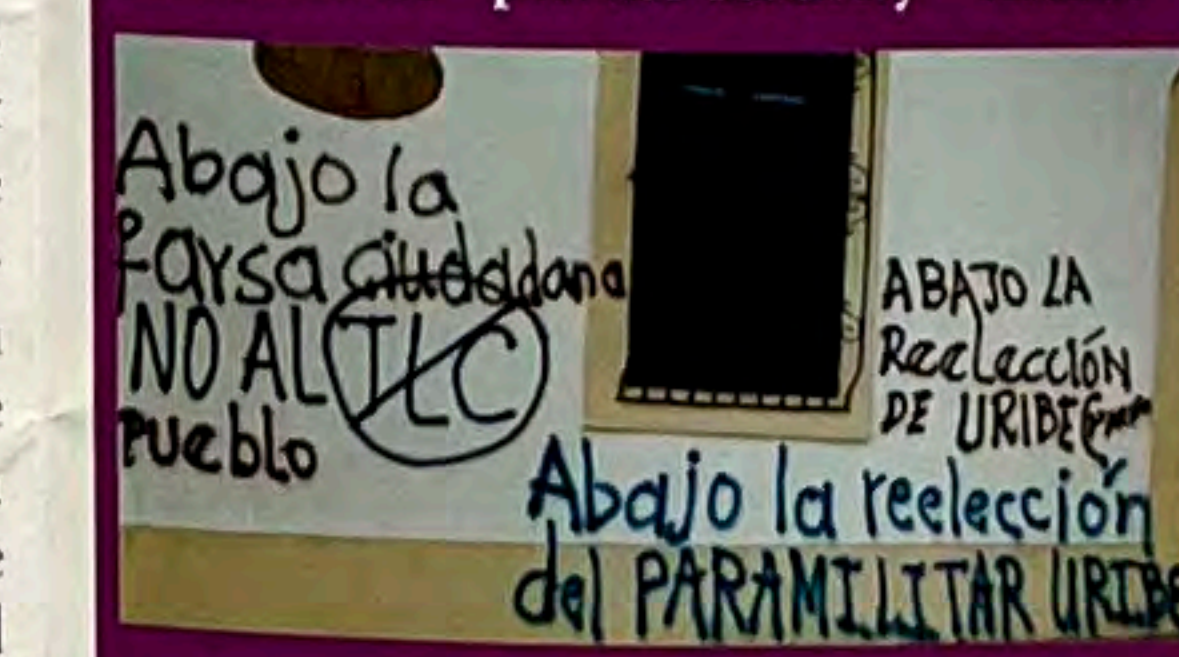
Like Chavez, Uribe decided that he wanted to change the law so that he could run for another term. Unlike Chavez, he was in no mood to consult the people about the change – instead of holding a referendum, Uribe's supporters pushed it through the Colombian parliament. When Uribe stood for re-election in 2006, more than half the electorate abstained. The right-wing death squads issued a statement on the eve of the vote, warning that they would greet a victory for Uribe's left-wing challenger with murderous violence: 'We will not permit a different result. If, on Sunday, the yellow shirts are in the majority, we will take care of dyeing them a different colour: blood red! This is our declaration of total war. All who do not accept the legitimacy of El Senor Presidente Alvaro Uribe Velez will be our next military target.'

Few Colombians would take such threats lightly. In the past decade, the paramilitaries have killed thousands of civilians. They have murdered trade unionists and peasant leaders, human rights defenders and peace activists. Anyone who challenges the imposition of an especially brutal form of neo-liberalism on Colombia is considered a fair target. The paramilitaries often use sadistic violence to terrorise the population, hacking people to death with machetes or chain-saws.

There has always been a close relationship between the Colombian state and the death squads. Without the tolerance and encouragement of the regular army, the paramilitary killers would find it very difficult to function. This collaboration has been documented in abundant detail by groups like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. But it has reached new peaks under the presidency of Alvaro Uribe, who earned himself the nickname 'Mr Killer' during his spell as governor of Antioquia.

Uribe's rhetoric helps legitimise the targeting of social activists, as he routinely accuses them of supporting the FARC and ELN guerrilla movements (the president once referred to human rights NGOs as 'political adventurers ultimately in the service of terrorism'). That makes it easier for the paramilitaries to justify their killings. Uribe has granted an amnesty to the death squads, officially known as the 'Justice and Peace Law'.

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Investigations by Colombian magistrates have now uncovered links between the current administration and the paramilitaries reaching as far as the highest levels. Uribe's foreign minister was forced to resign after her senator brother was arrested because of his paramilitary ties. Another scandal has implicated Jorge Noguera, appointed by Uribe to head Colombia's intelligence services. Noguera was arrested when it emerged that he had been passing the details of trade union members – including their security arrangements – to the paramilitaries for targeting.

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BOOK REVIEW

Satire with an edge

By Ed Walsh (ISN)

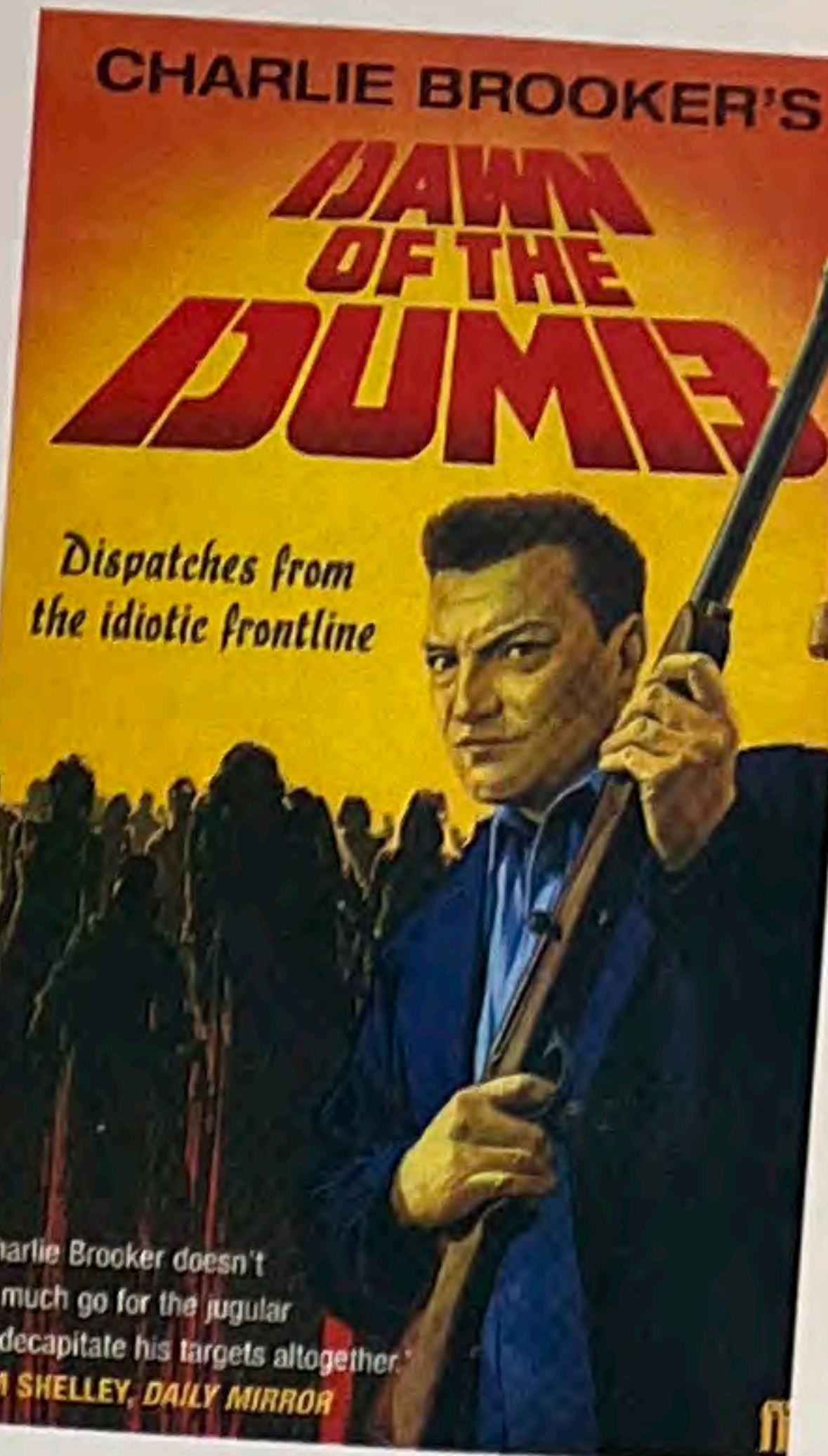
Charlie Brooker, *Dawn of the Dumb* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), 368 pages, paperback, €14.99.

For the past several years, Charlie Brooker has been one of the hidden joys of the British press: tucked away in the *Guardian's* weekend TV supplement, his gloriously vitriolic column, *Screen Burn*, has delivered some of the funniest journalism in the English language (no more than you'd expect from the writing partner of Chris Morris). This is the second collection of Brooker's *Guardian* articles, and for my money it's as good a skewering of modern Anglophone culture as you'll find.

Now, it's only fair to note that Brooker himself disclaims any direct political agenda: at one point he argues that 'the best satire floats somewhere in the centre – not in a non-committal sense, but a tactical one: positioned between the two sides, you're capable of lashing out in either direction.' With that in mind, it's no surprise to find him delivering such a damning verdict on George Galloway's appearance on *Celebrity Big Brother*: 'It's hard to think of anything worse he could've done during his stay in the house. But I'll have a go. He could have 1) masturbated repeatedly on camera, staring the viewer straight in the eye; 2) pooped into a big bowl of flour in the middle of the kitchen; and 3) killed at least nine of his fellow house-mates.'

You'll find, though, that Brooker has far more to say against the gougiers at the other end of the political spectrum (they're the ones with the power to screw things up properly, after all). After Tony Blair plays himself in a sketch for *Comic Relief*, our reviewer is effusive in his praise: 'For a second, I guffawed so loudly I almost forgot about the teetering stacks of skulls, the foaming geysers of blood, the phosphor burns, the pictures of young children with their arms blown off, and the constant metronomic background tick-tock of lie upon lie upon lie upon lie.'

The elevation of David Cameron to the leadership of the Conservative Party, and his love-in with the British media, inspires a lengthy rant about the young toff and his ilk: 'In descending order of vehemence, my objections to the Tory species stem from a) everything they do,



b) everything they say, c) everything they stand for, d) how they look, e) their stupid names and f) the noises I imagine they make in bed.'

Most of what he writes has little to do with politics in the conventional sense. But Brooker has a sharp eye for what the most trivial scraps from the culture industries tell us about the times we're living through. After describing a *Sky* magazine with a stupefying moronic system that places tiny celebrity faces beside each movie to let people know what they're getting (Brad Pitt meaning 'Eye Candy', Christopher Lee meaning 'Scary', and so on), he reflects that 'our leaders lie, and we know they have lied, and there is war in our name, and the world kicks and boils itself to death and we do nothing but stare into the tiny grinning faces of people we don't even know; faces that are, apparently, more "fast, easy and practical" than language itself. I give us six years, tops.'

The Left doesn't think about this stuff half as much as it should do, and you could find no better starting point than this book. It's all here, from the degeneration of 24 into raving neo-con propaganda to the class snobbery that explains the popularity of Jamie Oliver's healthy-eating campaign ('isn't it simply terrible, what these blossoms plets do to themselves? Nor our Josh, you understand: he eats nothing but organic spinach and attends lacrosse practice six hundred times a week'). Buy it now. •

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However, with a serious economic slow-down looming, the cosy 'social partnership' deal could be severely undermined. In such a context, the rank-and-file union members might find themselves in a strong position to weaken the grip of the bureaucrats at the top and to reassert the need for militancy in the face of ongoing attempts to weaken our conditions of employment.

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Title: Resistance, No. 4

Organisation: Irish Socialist Network

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