

RESISTANCE

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The Southern Bank Robbery

Kevin Quinn (ISN)

For the last few months, there's been a deafening clamour from the media and our political elite, telling us that we need to restore the public finances by slashing public-sector pay, unemployment benefit and other forms of state spending. In the meantime, we're supposed to forget all about the main reasons why we find ourselves in this mess: the collapse of the property bubble, the meltdown of Ireland's banking system, and the corrupt, back-scratching response of the Fianna Fáil-led government to the crisis. If we remember how we got into this crisis, it soon becomes clear that government cutbacks are not a "grim necessity" if the economy is going to recover – they are the price we must pay for Fianna Fáil's determination to bail out its cronies.

In autumn 2008, Ireland experienced an economic and financial "Black September" which marked the end of the Celtic Tiger economy. In September of that year the entire Irish financial services sector teetered on the brink of collapse. A decade of reckless lending to land speculators and developers meant Irish banks were effectively ruined when the property bubble burst; but for the intervention of the Irish state our banks would have faced whole-scale insolvency. Since then Ireland's privately-owned banks have been on financial life-support courtesy of the Irish taxpayer.

Indeed, Brian Cowen's benevolence towards the banks knows no bounds. He is on record as saying that whatever "cheques need signing" to save the banks, they will be forthcoming. The government's generosity towards the banks has been rationalised in terms of



• Is that a recovery I see?

"maintaining an effective banking system" and "sustaining the credit flow in the economy". In reality, the over-riding priority of this right-wing administration is to preserve at any cost the private status of the banks. For ideological reasons, Fianna Fáil and its Green Party lackeys have adopted the most expensive bail-out strategy to ensure that Ireland's largest and most powerful corporations – the banks – remained in private ownership. The Irish financial sector stands at the apex of country's private enterprise economy and for this reason the FF/ GP Government would not consider any dilution of its "independence". Hence it rejected out of hand Fine Gael's "Good Bank" solution and the Labour Party's temporary nationalisation plan.

Disregarding public opinion, which opposed a
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The Southern Bank Robbery

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bail-out of the banks and favoured nationalisation, the government has defiantly pursued its own agenda regardless of cost and public sentiment. To date its re-capitalisation programme has seen the state pouring €7 billion into the vaults of the privately owned AIB and Bank of Ireland. A further €4 billion was pumped into the insolvent Anglo Irish Bank. This latter sum is equivalent to the amount "saved" in the savage December budget, when cuts were made to social welfare payments, child benefit and public service pay.

Fianna Fáil's good will towards the banks didn't stop there. Finance minister Brian Lenihan announced that the State would acquire their toxic assets in order to clean up their balance sheets. To facilitate this, a new statutory body – christened the National Asset Management Agency (NAMA) – has been established to borrow €54 billion in order to buy those toxic assets at inflated prices. NAMA's role is to sit on the assets and pray that property prices rise at some stage in the next couple of years. Meanwhile it is to look after the

huge interest bill on the €54 billion loan. Its other function is to manage the very generous €2.64 billion costs set aside to run NAMA over the next decade. Out of this fund, investment bankers, lawyers, auctioneers and estate agents will be paid for their professional services. That's a whopping €240million a year slush fund.

The recapitalisation of the private banking sector and NAMA represent the largest transfer of public wealth into private hands in the history of the state. So will the Government's strategy work? The well-respected organ of international business opinion, the Financial Times, was not impressed: it voted Brian Lenihan the 2nd worst performing EU Finance Minister in 2008 and relegated him to the bottom of its charts for 2009. The FT described NAMA as "bold" and "untried". Morgan Kelly, professor of economics at UCD, had this to say: "As well as being expensive, history shows NAMA-style bad banks to be profoundly corrupt and corrupting institutions. Bad banks are the means for governments to choose which oligarchs will survive to emerge stronger

than before. They do not just happen to behave in a corrupt and anti-democratic manner, it is what they are designed to do.

"The Government's insistence that NAMA and the recapitalisation programmes will lead to the freeing up of credit was flatly contradicted by Eugene Sheehy, CEO of AIB, when he appeared before the Oireachtas Finance Committee in November 2009. Mr Sheehy told the Committee: "If people think the day after NAMA that the country is going to be awash with money – it is not going to happen." In the aftermath of the September 2008 crisis, the two largest banks could have been acquired by the State for as little as €5billion, giving direct control over the availability of credit. After opting for the massively expensive recapitalisation and NAMA projects, Brian Lenihan admitted that "it might be fair to say that what we are doing is struggling to maintain a private presence in our bank sector". God knows what price we will end up paying so Lenihan can win that "struggle".



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WEB LINKS

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.

Email: 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

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 10 years. Always worth a read.

www.redbannermagazine.com

TRADE UNIONS

The end of social partnership

Fergus O'Connor

While social partnership has been in existence for the last twenty two years it now appears to be on its last legs. It may be an appropriate time to review its outcomes. Employers, it seems, have been the principal beneficiary from partnership. Between 1987 and 1996 the profit share of business in the Irish private sector sharply increased from 25% to 35% while the rate of return on capital doubled. In the same period the wage share declined from 75% to 65%. There was a radical income shift away from labour towards capital. Not only did employers enjoy very moderate wage growth but there was also a steady decline in industrial conflict with the strike rate at a historically low level.

While employers did well, the same cannot be said for their opposite numbers. From a union perspective, partnership now seems to have been a dismal failure. At the outset the union objective in entering partnership talks was purely defensive. ICTU argued that a negotiated agreement with employers and government would act as a bulwark against the neo-liberal policies of deregulation, privatisation and union marginalisation. As we now know, all these policies have been implemented with disastrous consequences. There was little or no opposition from the union movement.

Once Partnership became firmly established its effect on the union leadership was startling. One senior official announced that the old conflict between labour and capital had been transcended. From now on partnership would replace adversarialism. With a nod to nationalist sentiment, he

added that we had broken decisively with the British tradition of "mindless militancy". This new age utopianism is difficult to explain. Maybe it was the result of a few appointments to partnership committees or boards of the remaining state enterprises. Or maybe it arose from the fact that Bertie, socialist, supporter of Man U, drinker of

Bass, winner on horses, former union member and the working man's friend, was in office.

Unfortunately for the trade union movement, employers were unaware a new age had dawned. For them it was business as usual. Despite the benefits of partnership and a cooperative union movement employers continued their traditional campaign of union extirpation. Since 1987 union density (% of unionised members in workforce) in the private sector has steadily declined. It is now as low as it was during the economically stagnant 1950s. Unrelenting and vigorous employer opposition has been the major factor in this decline. Beyond a few

whimpers little was done by a supine union leadership to oppose this drive.

This sorry state of affairs is the greatest failure of the union leadership under partnership. It is already having malign consequences. With the state sector heavily unionised and a tiny union presence in the private sector it leaves the union movement vulnerable to the charge of being a selfish interest group. The harmonic co-operators of partnership, devotees of the easy deal, have given the enemies of organised labour a stick with which to beat them. We can be sure they will lay it on with a will.



Government attacks community projects

Stephen Morris

In times of economic recession and massive unemployment, the services, facilities and programmes provided by the Community sector are more important and essential than ever. The Community sector's role is to provide grassroots services to working-class communities ravaged by the consequences of right-wing economic policies. These services are provided and delivered by the Community sector at a fraction of what it would cost the state. Yet it is facing savage cutbacks that threaten the future of many vital projects.

The services provided are broad and wide ranging. Meals on wheels for the elderly, childcare, drug rehabilitation programmes, back to education schemes, Community Employment Schemes (C.E.), Job Initiatives Programmes (J.I.), Community Development Programmes (C.D.Ps), youth groups, women's organisations, Traveller and anti-racism groups are just a few that could be mentioned. Yet a systematic attempt is being made by the Irish government to cut the funding to all of these vital Community services. The government is taking financial resources from these Community groups and giving it to banks, speculators, and property developers through bank bailouts and NAMA.

The abolition of the Christmas social welfare payment is just one of many cutbacks imposed on the working class and the Community sector by this Government. The 4% reduction in weekly social welfare payments imposed in last December's budget has now been extended to those on C.E. schemes and J.I. programmes. There have been cuts made to the training and material grants for those on C.E. and J.I. programmes. C.D.Ps are facing a battle simply to survive. 30 C.D.Ps around the country now face closure in the wake of the recommendations in the McCarthy Report. These closures will mean that the communities formerly served by the C.D.Ps will now lose vital services. C.D.Ps that are still able to continue functioning are

being forced to reduce spending in a way that will threaten their ability to continue providing essential services within their communities. It has been estimated that this year alone the Community sector is likely to see almost 7,000 people lose their jobs.

The impact of the cuts being felt within the Community sector will have long-term negative effects in communities. For instance, programmes such as Drug Rehabilitation have also seen cutbacks of 15-20% in their funding. The impact of such cutbacks will see crime rising in communities, as recovery programmes for addicts cannot do their work effectively. The Government has publicly stated that the cut of €4 billion made this year is only the first stage of many more cutbacks to come.

Perhaps the real reason why this Government is systematically targeting the Community

sector is that it offers hope, and tries to empower working-class communities. In September 2009, over 15,000 people – those working in the Community sector, those that avail of its services, and those that support its work – took to the streets of Dublin and other cities to oppose the cuts. Many in the Community sector believe it has been this level of resistance that prevented even more savage cutbacks. This resistance must continue. It is only through grassroots organisation – especially through the trade union movement – that the Community sector can defend itself. In tandem with this mobilization, the Community sector and the working-class communities it represents must build a political awareness that will ultimately reject the politics of Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, the Greens and the Labour Party. All of these parties support the cuts to the Community sector: it's just how they are implemented that divides them.

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



Labour Gains

Ed Walsh (ISN)

As people try to figure out what happened to the Celtic Tiger, the Irish Labour Party has seen a big rise in its support. With Fianna Fail sinking to third place in the opinion polls, Labour has been scoring high across the country, with voters in Dublin placing it ahead of all comers. If this surge holds together until the next general election, Labour might repeat the "Spring Tide" of 1992, when it won its highest ever share of the vote and more than thirty seats in the Dail. So what we should we expect from Labour and its leader Eamon Gilmore?

Gilmore has certainly tried to tap into public anger about the economic crash with populist rhetoric about Fianna Fail's cosy relationship with bankers and property developers. He has denounced the ruling party as "Celtic Tories" who want to "hammer public services, attack public servants, kick the poor and let the wealthy and the influential off scot free".

But this rhetoric doesn't mean Gilmore will stand behind workers who are trying to resist the vicious cut-backs of our "Celtic Tory" government. As the trade union movement prepared for a belated day of action against cuts, the Labour leader added his tuppence worth of condemnation: "I make no secret of the fact that I don't want to see strikes. I don't want to see conflict. I want to see people sitting down, reaching agreement and doing what's best in the interest of the country." Fianna Fail and the business elite represented by IBEC have made it clear that there's only one kind of "agreement" they're willing to negotiate with trade unions: the sort that involves drastic cuts in pay and conditions for workers. The only thing that can stop them in their tracks is industrial action. In practice, calling for trade unionists not to go on strike means telling them they should let the state and the employers walk right over them.

Gilmore went on to insist that "a Labour government would not be a trade union government ... in particular, there are



• What's on the menu from Labour?

reforms that have to be brought about in the running of our public services that would bring a government into difficulty at times with trade unions." Funnily enough, he wasn't so keen to emphasise that a Labour government wouldn't be an "IBEC government", or that some of the reforms Labour wants to introduce would bring it into confrontation with employers.

Of course, we're not really talking about a prospective "Labour government" at all: we're talking about a Fine Gael-Labour coalition, with FG in the driving seat as the largest party. Not for the first time in its history, Labour is paying the price for its own lack of ambition. After the 2002 election, Labour could have formed a left-wing bloc with other parties and independents that would have had more seats than Fine Gael. Instead, it helped Enda Kenny to lead his party back from a disastrous election. Fine Gael bounced back and is now in the ideal position to

take advantage of disillusionment with Fianna Fail's performance in power. Any government headed by Fine Gael will certainly deserve the "Celtic Tory" label – if anything, they'd be worse than the current administration.

Many people on the Irish Left still hope that Labour will break with the two conservative parties and lead a left alliance that can challenge for power. Sinn Fein has now made this into the cornerstone of its political strategy in the South. It doesn't seem like there's any chance of that happening, though. The current Labour leadership is clearly very comfortable with the prospect of entering a government with Enda Kenny as Taoiseach. There's no significant opposition to coalition with right-wing parties coming from inside Labour. Labour may hold up in the polls until the general election comes. But as a vehicle for changing Irish society, it's almost certainly a dead duck.

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Copenhagen: the predictable failure

Michael Lowy (Ecosocialist Network)
We - I mean the Marxists, the Eco-socialists, the radical climate justice activists - were quite pessimistic about the so-called United Nations Conference on Climate Change and had predicted that Copenhagen would end in a failure. We argued that the capitalist system doesn't know any criteria other than more accumulation, greater expansion and higher profits, and therefore is unable to take the minimal measures necessary to prevent catastrophic climate change. And since we knew that the vast majority of the "world leaders" present in Copenhagen are nothing but faithful servants of capitalist interests, we thought that the Conference would limit itself to vague promises about a 50% reduction of CO2 emissions by 2050. In one word, we believed that the Copenhagen mountain would give birth to a mouse.

Well, I must admit that we were wrong. We were not pessimistic enough. The Copenhagen conference did not give birth to a mouse but to a cockroach. Kyoto was already a big failure, since its aims were ridiculously low - a reduction of 5% until 2012 - and the methods used, such as the "market of pollution rights", absolutely unable to achieve any significant progress. But Copenhagen is much, much less than Kyoto, which at least acknowledged the need for internationally agreed commitments.

What happened? China accused the US of not committing itself to any meaningful measures to reduce emissions; the US accused China of not accepting any international commitment to reduce emissions. Both insisted that they couldn't do anything if the other doesn't move. Europe explained that they couldn't take any initiatives without the US and China. The only thing they all agreed on, and happily so, was the urgent need to do nothing.

So we have got only an ugly cockroach, called "The Copenhagen Accord", concocted by the "world leaders" before hurriedly leaving the Conference by the back door. It is a completely void document saying that, as everybody knows, one should prevent temperature rising beyond 2°C. Not a word about limitations of gas emissions, no percentages of reduction mentioned, not even as a wishful thinking, not even in a very far future. Nothing. Nihil. Zero content.

So, where is hope? The only hope that exists is in the 100,000 people who demonstrated in the streets of Copenhagen, coming from Denmark, Scandinavia, Germany, Europe and the whole world, asking for radical measures, denouncing the irresponsibility of the "responsible leaders", claiming for climate justice, and proposing to "change the system, not the climate". Or, in the thousands who peacefully marched to the doors of the Conference, trying to open a dialogue with the "official" representatives, but were received by tear gas and police clubs, and saw their spokesmen - like Tado Müller - arrested for "incitement to violence". Or in the thousands who took part in the discussions of the alternative KlimaForum, which adopted a resolution denouncing the pseudo-solutions of the system ("carbon trade", etc). There is also hope in political leaders like the Bolivian President Evo Morales - among the very few exceptions - that showed solidarity with the Climate Justice movement, and denounced capitalism as the system responsible for disastrous global warming.

Conclusion: many years ago, the famous poet and singer Joe Hill said, just before being shot by the authorities on fake accusations: "Don't mourn, organise." We must return to our countries, and organise people, in the fields, in the factories, in the schools, in the streets, to build a large international movement fighting against the system, to impose radical change, to save, not "the planet" - it is not in danger - but life on this planet from destruction.

www.ecosocialistnetwork.org/

BOOK REVIEW A Sticky Topic

Colm Breathnach (ISN)
Brian Hanley and Scott Millar *The Lost Revolution: The Story of the Official IRA and the Workers' Party* (Penguin, 2009)

This work sets out to give a detailed narrative account of the rise and fall of Official Republicanism and its successors and in that it is remarkably successful. Some might demand more analysis but this is to miss the point: the authors provide the raw material, leaving it to the reader to draw their own conclusions. Underlying the detailed nature of this book is the remarkable achievement of getting such a disparate range of members and former members of the WP/OIRA to give their side of the story.

TLR is an interesting, even exciting, but often depressing read. Ironically, in their attempts to cover the story of the WP from start to finish, the authors largely miss the one real gap in the clouds: for a brief period in the late 1980s the party attracted thousands of working people as members, supporters and voters. These people were not working for the establishment of some bleak 'People's Democracy': they were fighting to build a movement that claimed to, and in some distorted ways did, represent their real material interests. They believed what it said on the tin: here at last was an organisation that belonged to workers. When the writing on the tin proved to be a lie, the workers deserted with remarkable rapidity. Within a few years the vast majority of WP members/supporters and voters, in the South at least, had abandoned the two successor organisations.

But that betrayal of trust should not blind us to the fact that much good campaigning work happened at a local level, work that made a real difference to people's lives: on housing, employment, facilities etc. The mode of operation was often, initially at least, based on the active participation of those effected by these issues. Unfortunately, this often ended in the cul-de-sac of electoralism, as those mobilised by campaigns were sucked into electoral machines. But the lesson here is that a left organisation can mobilise people successfully, especially if it is willing to listen to their concerns rather than deciding in advance what the important issues are. What happens afterwards is largely down to the nature of the organisation.

So how did a movement ostensibly dedicated



to the emancipation of the Irish working class turn into the beast that it became? TLR clearly shows that the degeneration did not happen overnight, nor did it arise solely from the flaws of individual leaders. The bitter split with the IRSP/INLA, the fierce Belfast onslaught of the Provisional IRA in 1975, the isolation of the organisation in the North, laid the ground for some of the fatal flaws: the contraction of diverse views in an increasingly undemocratic internal regime, the emergence of elite cliques, the obsession with the Provos, the uncritical adoption of statist Stalinist ideology, the ideological dominance of Eoghan Harris and his followers, the uncritical pro-Soviet foreign orientation, the shift from a republican socialist position to what in practice was a unionist analysis.

The sorry history of mistakes and crimes that is catalogued in TLR should drive home the vital lessons: you cannot build a commonwealth of equals on a conspiracy of unequals, or erect a popular democracy on a foundation of party autocracy. These are not just historic lessons but ones which, given the Leninist roots of many of Ireland's socialist organisations, are more pertinent than ever. While it is fair to say that none of today's groupings display the degree of degeneration that the WP/OIRA did, the potential pitfalls are very real. Hopefully a read of TLR will give comrades pause for thought and might even contribute towards the emergence of a movement that truly deserves the accolade of being the party of workers.

MIDDLE EAST

Business as usual for Israeli apartheid

David Landy
When Barack Obama was elected he made many pledges about bringing peace to Israel/Palestine, and there was some hope he would end the Bush Doctrine of supporting Israel, right or wrong. In truth, most Palestinian solidarity activists weren't that hopeful about Obama. In the US, even in leftist circles, 'peace' is defined as Israel winning - maintaining itself as a semi-apartheid state within its borders, holding on to major settlement blocks and preventing Palestinian refugees (the majority of the population) from returning. Israel's illegal settlements are the most immediate problems: they have split up the West Bank into a series of disconnected Bantustans bifurcated by Jewish-only roads, enclosed by the Separation Wall (which the Irish company CRH is helping to build). Any real peace needs an end to them.



• Change you can't believe in

Many people, myself included, were then pleasantly surprised when one of the first things Obama insisted on was that Israel should stop constructing new settlements in the West Bank, especially Jerusalem. There was nothing about evacuating existing settlements, but the process has to start somewhere. This was followed by the June 4th speech Obama made in Cairo where he declared his commitment to a Palestinian state, and talked of Palestinians as if they were something other than terrorists. Israel's far-right government, headed by Benjamin Netanyahu was running scared, concerned they may have to make some concessions to maintain US favour. Israelis were pouring racist abuse on Obama. It seemed that there was some small possibility of change happening.

That was in early summer. Already by mid-summer it was clear that there would be no settlement freeze. The Israelis stepped up their evictions and slow ethnic cleansing of Palestinians in Jerusalem, and the settlements continued to grow. New settlements are being built in the Jordan valley and Netanyahu is boasting about how he dealt with Obama and averted the threat of peace. Even worse, the US is once again helping Israel undermine

international law. It succeeded in pressuring the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority to refuse to endorse the Goldstone report, which investigated Israel's crimes in Gaza. In the UN, the US didn't bother turning up for the November 4th debate on the report, vowing to sideline it. It's back to business as usual, with ongoing Israeli dispossession of Palestinians overlooked by the US - and by the EU. What happened?

Some will say this shows the all-powerful nature of the Israel lobby. This conspiratorial theory is, at best, deeply disempowering. Certainly Zionists in the US are better organised than Palestinian supporters, and in all likelihood Obama weighed up the balance of forces and - as with so many other things - decided not to upset the more powerful side. But there is nothing inevitable about this. Far from it - US Palestinians and their supporters are a growing force and Zionism is declining. For many Americans the January 2009 attack on Gaza that killed 1300 Palestinians was a watershed, one which

has allowed pro-Palestinian points of view, debate about the Israel lobby and even talk about the boycott of Israel to enter the mainstream. This breaking of taboo has been accompanied by a growing revolt among American Jews against the Zionists controlling their community.

The growth of boycott and divestment actions in the US has taken everyone by surprise. For the first time ever the international Palestine solidarity movement is taking leads from the US in how to organise boycott and other Palestinian solidarity actions. In the end this change is more welcome than any amount of empty rhetoric issued by faux-messianic leaders. The humiliation of Obama by Israel has shown that any real change in US policies towards Israel/Palestine will not be bought about through such rhetoric, but through the grassroots solidarity actions of this growing and diverse array of activists.

David Landy is the chair of the Ireland Palestine Solidarity Campaign. He writes here in a personal capacity.

ROUGH GUIDE TO SOCIALISM

Changing the media

Ed Walsh (ISN)
If you had any doubts about the conservative bias of the Irish media, the last year will have set them to rest. From every corner of the print and broadcast media, we've been deluged with propaganda about the economic crisis, trying to shift the blame from corrupt bankers and property developers to public-sector workers, single mothers and the unemployed. At times the bias has been so extreme that it's almost comical.

It's all very well giving out, but what are we meant to do about it? Funnily enough, while the Left has long been familiar with the conservative, pro-business slant of the media, it's been slow to work out proposals for media reform that could go some way towards correcting the imbalance. You could fill a book with ideas for change, but this article will just suggest a couple of simple demands that should be taken up by everyone trying to represent the interests of working people: trade unions, community groups or political organisations.

Public-sector broadcasting in Ireland follows the model laid down by the BBC for current affairs reporting: journalists are meant to be objective, impartial, and present the facts without any political bias. This sounds good, but ultimately it's based on an illusion. You can't just "present the facts", simply because there are so many facts to go around. Every journalist has to be selective in what they choose to report. The prominence given to one bit of information over another, the language used to describe people or organisations: it all carries a political charge. In practice, broadcasters like RTE or the BBC tend to reflect the conventional wisdom in the way they report the news.

To counteract this bias, we need to ditch the idea that one group of journalists can present the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. The Welsh socialist leader Nye Bevan had a saying: "This is my truth: tell me yours." That's how public-sector broadcasting should work: people who don't usually get a chance to put across their point of view should be given the opportunity to work with trained journalists making programmes. Opponents of the Shell pipeline in Rosport, for example, should have been invited by now to make several hour-long documentaries as a

corrective to the hostile media coverage of their campaign. Community projects suffering the affects of government cutbacks would be another prime candidate for broadcast time.

Secondly, the rotten libel laws should be scrapped and replaced with a new system. As it is, corporations and rich individuals take advantage of the libel laws to intimidate the media and stop it from reporting on their dodgy behaviour: even when a story is definitely, 100% true, newspapers are often reluctant to publish for fear of a damaging libel action. Yet the libel laws do nothing to protect ordinary people who can't afford the legal fees required to bring a case. Newspapers can defame them without any fear of negative consequences, and do so all the time.

In place of the libel laws, there should be an independent body that can hear complaints about the media from any citizen, rich or poor, who believes they have been the victims of false and malicious reporting. If the complaint is upheld, newspapers would have to give a right to reply with equal space and prominence on their pages: if the original story was on the front page, the reply would have to go there too. There would be no financial penalties involved. A system like that would protect everyone from unethical journalism, while freeing up the media to go after powerful crooks without the fear of being bankrupted.

Reforms like this would definitely improve the situation. But in the long run, if we want to break the hold of Tony O'Reilly and co. over the media, we will have to break their hold over the economy, too.

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