

Towards a Revolutionary Party in Ireland

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The water charges movement showed that working class communities didn't need a revolutionary party to block water meters, to get out on the streets in their hundreds of thousands and to inflict a serious defeat on the government.

It is the same story in other countries. In Spain people didn't need a party to occupy squares in their millions and in Egypt in 2011 they didn't need a party to drive the police off the streets, defeat the counter-revolutionary *baltagiya* (hired thugs) and bring down a dictator. In France today no one needs a revolutionary party to mount mass strikes and street protests, take on the brutal CRS riot cops and hold exciting street debates.

Even if we accept the need for elected representatives to form a left government we still don't need a revolutionary party. The experience of Syriza in Greece, of Sanders in the US, of Corbyn in Britain, of Podemos in Spain, and even of AAA-PBP and Independents4Change in Ireland might suggest that most people don't want some kind of narrow revolutionary party; what they want is a broad united party of the left.

So why do we need to 'build the revolutionary party'?

Three reasons

There are three main reasons why a revolutionary party must be built.

First, even in terms of an immediate struggle such as the anti-water charges movement having a revolutionary socialist party at its heart is a very **positive** thing – it helps the campaign to win.

A revolutionary party brings together activists from Clondalkin and Ballyfermot, Artane and Dun Laoghaire, Cork and Sligo, Wicklow and Wexford. It also involves people who fought the household charges and the bin tax and some who resisted water charges the first time around. In the party these activists can pool their experience and form a coherent strategy.

This was what happened and on that basis we argued that it was not enough just to resist meters – important as that was – but we needed mass demonstrations. And mass demos were not enough – we needed a mass boycott. But the mass boycott also needed masses on the streets to sustain it. And that resistance to meters and the demos and the boycott needed to be accompanied by a challenge at the ballot box.

And this strategy has been proven correct. But in fact each part of it was resisted at various times by elements in the movement. To win it we needed a coherent group of people – at the heart of the movement – patiently arguing for this strategy.

This is not just the case on water charges but applies to other issues. Take the Luas workers. Having a broad range of activists with experience of strikes and the trade unions means that we had people who, from the start, knew how to answer the media attacks on the Luas workers and who understood that a victory for the Luas workers would be a victory for all workers, and also grasped the importance of mobilising organised solidarity. Without a party the tendency would be just to sit back as individuals either cursing at the TV or worse being influenced by it.

Then again there is the question of the trade union leaders. Workers when they first go on strike often feel they have no choice but to trust their union leaders but workers in a revolutionary party will learn from the experience of others that union leaders shouldn't be relied on. Trade union leaders and officials have a long history, not just in Ireland but internationally, of vacillation: of seeming to back workers struggles but then holding them back, letting them down and even completely selling them out. This derives not just from the personal weakness of individual leaders but from the objective social position of union bureaucracies as mediators between labour and capital. But you won't learn about this in school or college and RTE is certainly not going to tell you.

Nor will you hear about it from broad reformist parties, not even left reformist parties, which are almost always linked to, and dependent on, the left wing of the trade union bureaucracy. Only a revolutionary party is going to highlight this vital issue for workers in struggle.¹

The question of refugees and racism is another example. Even good activists in the water charges movement or militant trade unionists - even if they are instinctively anti-racist (as most are) - won't necessarily know how to answer the arguments about foreigners taking our jobs or 'shouldn't we look after our own first'. And even people who are sympathetic to refugees may find it hard to deal with media flak that follows something like the Paris atrocities. Again a revolutionary party that brings people together and responds collectively and has people who know the facts, the history and the arguments greatly strengthens all involved and the anti-racist cause as a whole.

Second, there is the fact that forming a left government is, in itself, not enough. Any such government will face concerted resistance from the ruling class i.e. the 1%, and this resistance can lead to the left government being blocked, undermined, corrupted or destroyed. This has been proven again and again from what happened in Chile in 1970-73, when the Popular Unity government led by Salvador Allende was crushed by a military coup which killed thousands of Chileans, to numerous Labour governments in Britain, to the recent experience of Syriza in Greece.

It is not the case that knowledge of these events will be held, or pop spontaneously into the heads of water charges campaigners or working class people who join some other mass revolt in the future. Certainly the media won't tell them. So again there needs to be a body of socialists within any movement for a left government who act as the memory of the working class and understand the need not to rely on any left government and to go

further i.e. to move towards revolution and the smashing of the capitalist state.² Without that revolutionary spine the movement, even if it establishes a left government, will be derailed.

Third, if we accept the need for a revolution, then we also have to understand that although revolutions generally begin spontaneously, without the leadership of a revolutionary party, they don't end that way, or rather they don't end in victory.

The Irish Revolution of 1919 -23 is a good example of this. The Irish working class did magnificent things in those years with its general strikes, its factory occupations and 'soviets' and its defeat of the forces of the British Empire, but the fact that it had no revolutionary party of its own made it vulnerable to the politics of nationalism (both that of Collins and that of De Valera) and the weak compromisers of the Irish Labour Party and Trade Unions. This allowed the counter-revolution to triumph and betray what the rebels of 1916 had fought for and establish a conservative capitalist state which, in its essentials, has remained intact until today.³

More recently the experience of the great Egyptian Revolution in 2011 showed the same problem. What the Egyptian masses achieved in 18 days of revolt - bringing down one the strongest regimes in the Middle East - was extraordinary. But having done that the political experience, clarity and cohesion of those masses was not enough to enable them to deal with the betrayal of the revolution by the Muslim Brotherhood and its repression by the Military in 2013.

There **were** organised revolutionary Marxists in Egypt in 2011 - the Egyptian Revolutionary Socialists. They were a splendid organisation who had shown great bravery in the struggle against Mubarak and had very good politics but they were too small (a couple of thousand in a country of 80 million) to shape events when many millions were on the streets as there were on the de-

¹See John Molyneux, 'Marxism and Trade Unionism', *Irish Marxist Review* 1.

²See V.I.Lenin, *The State and Revolution* and James O'Toole 'Socialists and Left Government' *Irish Marxist Review* 12.

³See Kieran Allen, *1916: Ireland's Revolutionary Tradition*, London, 2016, Ch 3-5.

⁴See John Molyneux, 'Lessons from the Egyptian Revolution', *Irish Marxist Review* 13. <http://irishmarxistreview.net/index.php/imr/article/view/165>

cisive day of the 30 June 2013.⁴ As a result the Egyptian military were able to manipulate popular discontent with the Muslim Brotherhood government to carry out a brutal coup with a large measure of popular support. If the Revolutionary Socialists had been much stronger they could have channelled that popular anger in a progressive and left wing direction.

This need for a revolutionary party seriously rooted in the working class is not just proved by the Irish and Egyptian Revolutions but by the whole history of the working class and the revolutionary movement in the 20th and 21st centuries. Time and again working people have risen up against the system and time and again the revolution has been beaten back. This is what happened in Italy 1919-20, in Germany 1919-23, Spain 1936, France 1968, Portugal 1974, and many other examples.

The case of May '68 in Paris is very instructive. A mass revolt of French students led to large scale fighting with the police especially on the legendary 'night of the barricades' in the Latin Quarter of Paris on 10 May. The extremely brutal response of the riot police and the heroism of the students inspired a general strike in protest and solidarity by the French working class. Originally intended as a one-day 'demonstration' strike by the unions it turned rapidly into an unlimited all-out general strike accompanied by numerous factory occupations. More than 10 million workers took part, including even the dancers at the Folies Bergere, and the whole society was paralysed.

At this time revolutionary ideas of all sorts – anarchist, Trotskyist, spon-tanist, Maoist etc – were widely circulating amongst the students but the workers' movement and the trade unions were dominated by the Stalinist and very reformist and conservative Communist Party (PCF) The PCF was hostile to the student revolt from the start and only reluctantly called – through the unions it controlled – the general strike which it sought to limit and restrain. In the student milieu there were a number of small revolutionary socialist 'groupuscules' – proto revolutionary parties – but they had no base in the working class.

The strategy of the PCF, which was a mass party, was to use its apparatus to keep the workers and students apart and thus prevent the workers being infected by revolutionary ideas. They did this by sending the students away when they turned up at the gates of occupied factories and by using trade union stewards to cordon off the student and worker contingents on the mass demonstrations. At the same time they worked to demobilise the factory occupations by sending the rank-and- file home and leaving the workplaces in the hands of union officials. Then factory by factory, sector by sector, they negotiated a return to work on the basis of limited economic concessions from the employers and a great opportunity to move towards the transformation of society was thrown away.

The key problem was the absence of a revolutionary party with roots among both the students and the workers which would have been able to combat the strategy of the PCF, above all from within the workplaces.

Only in Russia in 1917 was a serious and experienced revolutionary party, the Bolshevik Party, in place and only in Russia was the working class able to take power.

The absence of trained revolutionary parties and correct revolutionary leadership, elsewhere in Europe in the revolutionary wave that followed the First World War (of which the Irish Revolution was a part) meant the defeat of that wave. That meant not only the survival of capitalism but the isolation of the Russian Revolution and the consequent rise of Stalinism and the victory of fascism in Italy, Germany and Spain.

The reason a revolutionary party is so essential is that even in a revolutionary situation in which the masses are on the streets and occupying their workplaces their consciousness will still be very uneven. While there will be many that are thoroughly revolutionary, there will be others that are still influenced by reformist and even reactionary ideas. In Ireland, because of its anti-imperialist and republican tradition, it is likely that nationalism will play a significant role. Moreover there will be some who, through inexperience, are ultraleft and want to storm the Dáil and take power immedi-

ately without a serious assessment of the chances of success.

In a revolutionary situation this will matter enormously. As we have already noted, In the Irish Revolution of 1919-23 a combination of nationalism – the idea of a common ‘national interest’ uniting the nation – and Labour Party reformism was able to persuade workers that ‘Labour must wait’ until after Irish independence was won: they are still waiting! In the Egyptian Revolution nationalism, a legacy of the anti-imperialist figure President Nasser who nationalised the Suez Canal, played a significant role in persuading the masses to back the military coup against the Muslim Brotherhood.⁵

Similarly in Egypt youthful and impatient ultraleftism which had played a magnificent role in the street fighting in the first eighteen days became a problem. For them the revolution consisted ONLY of going to Tahrir Square and fighting the police; they did not understand the need for strategy and tactics, for patient work to win over the **majority** of the workers and peasants in the workplaces and the villages.

It is not difficult to see how such problems could arise in a future revolutionary situation in Ireland. Nationalist and republican ideas, which also have an influence in the Irish trade union movement, could be traded on to win support for some kind of Sinn Féin- Fianna Fáil deal to found a ‘new republic’ and then to ‘give the new republic a chance’ in a way that would really give capitalism a chance to get its irons out of the fire.

Likewise there would probably be those who believed that if they occupied the Central Bank Plaza in Dame St. or went on hunger strike outside the GPO for long enough or scaled the gates of Leinster House with a hundred people or so the system would some how fall at their feet. And the failure of this to happen would actually assist the nationalist/reformist project by not reaching out to and convincing the majority.

Therefore there has to be an organised, cohesive body able to focus the movement on

acting decisively to take power, not tomorrow or next week, but when the opportunity really arises. This is not a question of acting on behalf of the masses but winning the masses themselves to the need to overthrow the state and take over the running of the state through their own democratic assemblies.

The central lesson is that the revolutionary party has to be built and trained in advance of the revolution. It is the tragedy of Ireland’s greatest revolutionary socialist, James Connolly, that he was not able to do this.

Our opportunity

The key point of this article is not just the more or less timeless truth that building the revolutionary party needs to be done but that right now, here in Ireland, North and South, we have a particular opportunity to actually do it, or make significant progress towards doing it. A glance at history and the world situation today shows that since the marginalisation of genuine revolutionary socialism by the rise of Stalinism and the victory of fascism in the 1930s it has been extremely difficult to build substantial revolutionary workers’ parties anywhere so this claim needs substantiation.

The basis for it is the evident radicalisation of substantial sections of the Irish working class both South and North. In the South the clearest expression of this has been the mass anti-water charges movement which achieved a scale of mobilisation in working class communities that was truly exceptional. However it is important to understand that the water revolt gave vent to years of accumulated anger over the economic crash, the bank bail-out, wage cuts, the USC, the Household Charge, community cuts, health cuts, the housing crisis and everything else associated with austerity. It was often said the water charges were ‘the straw that broke the camel’s back’. There was an element of truth in this but it didn’t quite capture what happened. It

⁵In 2013 the main Nasserist leader, Hamdeen Sabahy, who had been a major opponent of Mubarak and the Iraq War and was seen as sympathetic to the left, explicitly gave his backing to Sisi’s military coup, as did a number of leading Nasserist trade unionists.

wasn't so much that water charges were one more piece of pain that crossed some pain threshold and caused an explosion of rage as that water charges were a piece of pain that the working class felt it could do something about.

If you walk over the Ha'penny Bridge the sight of the homeless begging is heartbreaking but what can you do immediately except put a euro in a cup, which solves nothing. If you take your child or elderly parent to A&E and wait 10 hours in a war zone for treatment it leaves you fuming but feeling powerless. And when you refused to pay the Household Charge they changed the name and the rules so that they could take it out of your wages and that reinforced the sense of bitter resignation. But when you hear that for water charges they have to install a water meter outside your front door and that they can't take it out of your wages or pension, that is something you, and your neighbours, CAN resist – and they did, massively. So the water charges became the lightning rod for all the anger at austerity and growing inequality. And, as we know, people who engage in active resistance radicalise – they broaden their horizons and move leftwards.

Another important sign of this was the magnificent yes vote on marriage equality which was particularly high in working class areas. Of course some of this radicalisation, especially at the start, took the form of hostility to all politics and political parties but overall people involved in the water charges struggle abandoned the traditional mainstream [FG/FF/Lab] and became open to supporting alternatives – Sinn Féin, independents and, crucially, the AAA-PBP alliance. There are also signs that a revival in workplace and trade union struggle may be underway with the very important Luas workers strike plus Tesco workers, teachers, and nurses involved in disputes, which would add a vital extra ingredient to the mix. Thus there is a much expanded audience for socialist and revolutionary ideas.

In the North there has been no mass struggle like the water charges but there

have been large trade union led one-day strikes and demonstrations against cuts and job losses and numerous small campaigns and at the same time the emergence of a new generation fed up with, and anxious to move beyond, the old sectarian conflicts of the past. In a way the lightning rod for all this discontent has been the People Before Profit election campaign itself, especially that of Gerry Carroll in West Belfast, which itself seemed to take on some of the characteristics of a social movement. So again there is a much expanded audience for socialism in the North.

The opportunity created by this radicalisation of the working class is enhanced by certain specific features of the political landscape. In the North the fact that Sinn Féin is implementing austerity in coalition with the DUP has created a substantial political space to their left. Moreover there is no significant left reformist formation, no Syriza or Podemos or Sanders or Corbyn, able to occupy that space. There are, of course, the dissidents and a few others on the left but People Before Profit has a relatively clear run at it.

In the South our opportunity benefits from a) the damage done to Fianna Fáil, which used to have a mass working class vote, to by the crash and its aftermath – damage from which it has still not really recovered; b) the implosion of the Labour Party; c) the failure of Sinn Féin to convince large numbers of working people of their trustworthiness and so achieve the degree of electoral advance that they and others expected.

The historically much lamented weakness of the Irish left in both jurisdictions, i.e. the absence of mass reformist parties comparable to the British Labour Party, German Social Democracy or various European Communist Parties, thus turns into our opportunity⁶. The substantial success People Before Profit has already had in seizing that opportunity further increases the possibility of building a serious revolutionary party.

People Before Profit is not a revolution-

⁶There is an interesting historical parallel here in that the Bolshevik Party was successfully built in Russia where reformism was exceptionally weak in comparison with most of Europe, and Trotskyism in the sixties did relatively well in countries (Britain, USA) where Stalinism was weak.

ary socialist party but neither is it a reformist party. It contains no organised reformist wing and has no careerist or privileged bureaucracy⁷ and no dependency on a section of the trade union bureaucracy – frequently a crucial underpinning of reformist and left reformist parties. Rather People Before Profit is a political formation in which revolutionaries operate freely and openly but where there is also space for people who are not revolutionaries but want to fight austerity and the system, many of whom are not opposed to revolution but who have not, or have not yet, thought the issue of revolution and the revolutionary party through. It is important that this space continues to remain open and protected but in so far as it grows, and the chance is there for it grow significantly, it is also creates the possibility of drawing people into the revolutionary party.

How to build the Party

At any point in time there are always some individuals who can be won to the revolutionary party just on the basis of ideas (and it is always necessary to do this). But a significant, large revolutionary workers party cannot be built apart from or separate from the mass movement of working people.

The party and its members must always be part of and engaged in the actual struggles of working people, helping those struggles to develop and win – as we have done in Ireland over the water charges and many other campaigns (household charges, Forests, bin charges, Luas workers, Greyhound workers etc, etc,.) It is in these struggles that people radicalise and open up to new ideas. By working alongside them socialists can win their respect, influence them and win them to socialism and revolution..

But if the party cannot be built outside of the mass movement neither can it be built by just merging with the movement and dropping wider political issues. It is perfectly possible to be bitterly opposed to water charges or passionate about tackling the housing crisis while at the same time being hostile to refugees or immigrants. This has

to be challenged and argued with. We need a water charges movement and a housing movement (and a working class movement generally) with an anti-racist culture.

This is not a matter of abstract moral principle. Some socialists are vegetarian on principle – they believe it is morally wrong to eat meat – but it is not necessary to challenge meat eating in the movement. This is because racism can be used (and various right wing political forces will use it) to divert, split and derail the whole mass movement, in a way that cannot be done with non-vegetarianism.

The same is true of a woman's right to choose and the question of sexism and of homophobia etc. These are major issues in Irish society and it is not possible to build a party that is not unequivocal on these matters. Individual newly radicalising people may need convincing and that should be approached sensitively but the issues cannot be ducked or swept under the carpet.

Similarly in any popular grass roots campaign, especially in its early stages, there will always be those who say 'this should be non-political' or that 'political parties should leave their banners, papers and ideas at the door' etc. We have to resist this. They will say that politics puts people off but this is not true. The biggest demonstrations in Irish history – the water charges demos – had thousands of political placards and political literature freely available. The same is true internationally, e.g. the great anti-Iraq war demos of 2003 which mobilized up to 2 million in London and over 100,000 in Dublin and maybe 35 million globally, were filled with political placards. No one was put off by this.

Sometimes tactical compromises will be necessary but in general we are for campaigns and movements and demos in which all progressive parties who support the goals of the movement are welcome with their banners and literature.

Also to build the party we have to actively recruit, which means not only issuing general calls but also identifying likely individuals, talking to them and **asking** them to join.

⁷On this point PBP's problem hitherto has been having too little bureaucracy, not too much.

Party building and campaigning always have to be combined. But exactly how and in what proportion depends on circumstances. For example the balance is different in the middle of an election campaign and after it or on the first approach to a picket line and on the fourth or fifth.

How to do this is an art: it cannot be reduced to a fixed set of rules but has to be learned in practice. This learning process is a collective one in which we share experiences, from the past and the present and from different areas.

Without recruitment no revolutionary party can survive let alone grow, but recruitment (signing the form) is simply the start

of the process. New members have to be integrated, involved and educated. No one is born a socialist and they don't teach socialism in school. But if people don't develop a rounded socialist outlook they will not survive the constant battering from the media. This has to be done in branches. Recruitment and growth means branch building – that means regular and interesting meetings which link practice and theory, agitation, propaganda and education.

All of this can only be done effectively if there is a shared perspective of building a revolutionary party, based on an understanding of the opportunity we now have and the necessity of seizing it.