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# Red & Black Revolution



A Magazine Of Libertarian Communism

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Front cover pic: A.A. O'Carroll  
Soho "Sex Workers" pic: Guy Smallman



## About the Workers Solidarity Movement

The Workers Solidarity Movement was founded in Dublin, Ireland in 1984 following discussions by a number of local anarchist groups on the need for a national anarchist organisation. At that time with unemployment and inequality on the rise, there seemed every reason to argue for anarchism and for a revolutionary change in Irish society. This has not changed.

Like most socialists we share a fundamental belief that capitalism is the problem. We believe that as a system it must be ended, that the wealth of society should be commonly owned and that its resources should be used to serve the needs of humanity as a whole and not those of a small greedy minority. But, just as importantly, we see this struggle against capitalism as also being a struggle for freedom. We believe that socialism and freedom must go together, that we cannot have one without the other. As Mikhail Bakunin, the Russian anarchist said, "*Socialism without freedom is tyranny and brutality*".

Anarchism has always stood for individual freedom. But it also stands for democracy. We believe in democratising the workplace and in workers taking control of all industry. We believe that this is the only real alternative to capitalism with its on going reliance on hierarchy and oppression and its depletion of the world's resources.

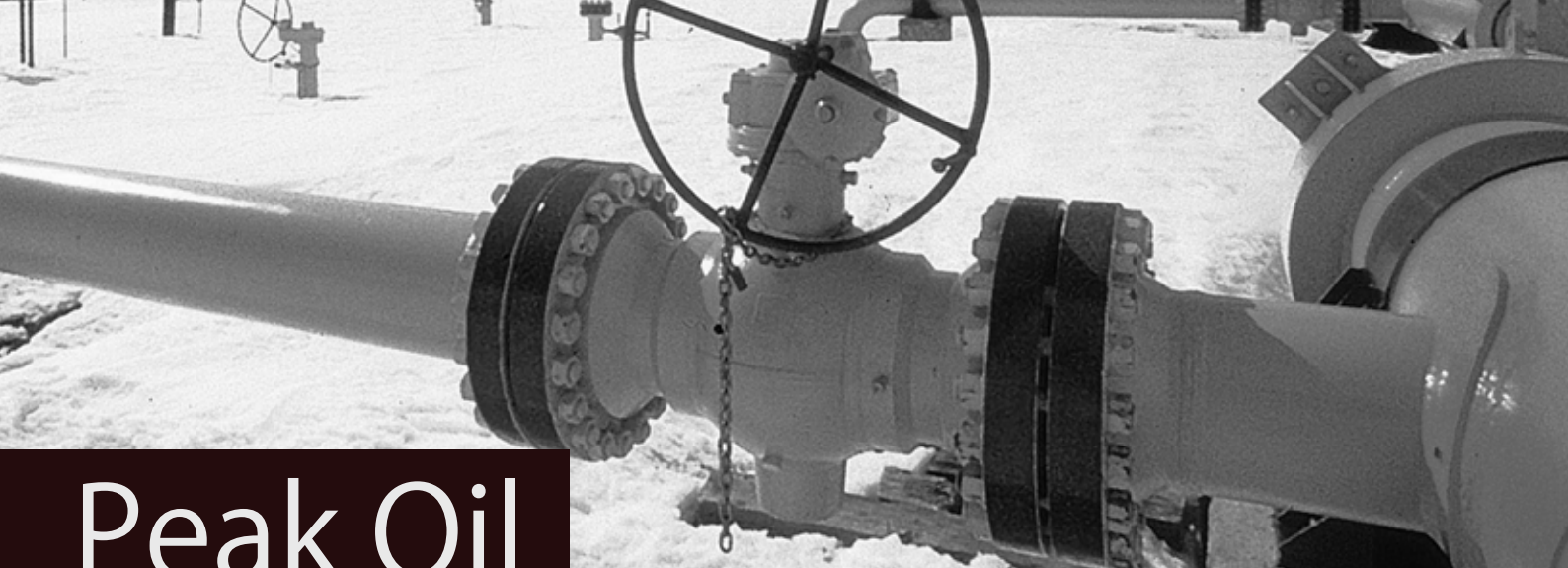
In the years since our formation, we've been involved in a wide range of struggles - our members are involved in their trade unions; we've fought for abortion rights and against the presence of the British state in Northern Ireland, and against the growth of racism in southern Ireland; we've also been involved in campaigns in support of workers from countries as far apart as Poland, Nepal, Peru and South Africa. Alongside this, we have produced over 90 issues of our paper Workers Solidarity, and a wide range of pamphlets. Over the years we have brought many anarchists from abroad to speak in Ireland. These have included militants from Chile, the Czech Republic, Canada, the USA, Israel, Greece, Italy, and a veteran of the anarchist Iron Column in the Spanish Civil War.

As anarchists we see ourselves as part of a long tradition that has fought against all forms of authoritarianism and exploitation, a tradition that strongly influenced one of the most successful and far reaching revolutions in the last century - in Spain in 1936 - 37. The value of this tradition cannot be underestimated today. With the fall of the Soviet Union there is renewed interest in our ideas and in the tradition of libertarian socialism generally. We hope to encourage this interest with Red & Black Revolution. We believe that anarchists and libertarian socialists should debate and discuss their ideas, that they should popularise their history and struggle, and help point to a new way forward.

A couple of years ago our paper, Workers Solidarity became a free news-sheet, which appears every two months. With a print-run of around 8,000, this means a huge increase in the number of people here in Ireland receiving information about anarchism and struggles for change. As more people join the WSM, we are able to do more to promote anarchism. If you like what we say and what we do, consider joining us. It's quite straight-forward. If you want to know more about this just write or email us.

We have also increased and improved our presence on the Internet. This move has been prompted by the enormous success to date of our web site and resources. The WSM site has been updated and moved to [www.wsm.ie](http://www.wsm.ie) and we are adding new material all the time. A large number of people are now looking at and reading about our anarchist ideas on our site. Many of our papers, magazines, posters and some pamphlets are available in PDF format - allowing for material to be downloaded in pre-set format, to be printed and distributed right across the world.

**[www.wsm.ie](http://www.wsm.ie)**



# Peak Oil

*The politics & reality of the peak oil scare.*

Peak Oil Theory has been around since the 1970s. Some think we have already reached 'peak oil', others think it will happen with the next twenty-five years. The theory argues that when we reach 'peak oil' the rate at which we extract oil from the earth (measured in millions of barrels per day) will reach a maximum and thereafter will start to drop.

As the rate at which we use oil is currently close to the rate at which we extract it, the point of peak oil will coincide or be closely followed by the world consuming more oil than it is producing. As oil reserves are very limited, within months there simply will not be enough oil available.

For this reason Peak Oil Theory tends to come as part of a package which is about more than the production and consumption of oil. It also expresses fears about how society will be affected when the oil runs short. In essence, Peak Oil Theory is both about the economics of oil and a pessimistic vision of the future. In many cases Peak Oil is a theory that catastrophe is about to hit humanity. In the first half of this article, we ask if our future is inevitably pessimistic.

In the second half of the article I will examine the peak oil claims themselves. How bad do things really seem to be? This article will demonstrate that the depth of polarisation over this issue is such that even claimed 'scientific facts' cannot be trusted to be accurate but rather tend to reflect the ideological point of view of those offering them. On the one hand, a decreasing number of people deny there is any problem with oil supply. On the other are a growing number who predict peak within a few years and a cataclysmic effect on civilisation as a result.

Why should anarchists care about this argument? Well, if such a crash were to happen it would be a disaster, not only for the world's population but also for the anarchist project. Oil provides most of the energy that makes current standards of living possible. The nature of the crash would set worker against worker in the fight for access to the limited resources the ruling class would allow to trickle down. And, as the various national ruling classes fought to gain control over the resources of other nations, workers would be pitted against each other in more and more destructive wars.

*Before we panic though we need to consider how real all of this is.*

## Part A: We are all going to die!

The idea that the human population growth would cause it to go into decline is not a new one. An 18th century English economist called John Malthus first made it. The arguments he put forward then are very similar to the arguments made by the Peak Oil theorists. It's worth going back to the beginning and looking at Malthus' ideas as perhaps the modern day theorists are equally wrong in the assumptions they share about human society.

## Why does Malthus matter?

In the late 18th century Malthus produced the first really systematic look at the question of human population. By looking at the patterns of population changes in various species he concluded that, in the absence of predators, the population of any species would increase exponentially, until it exhausts the resources on which it depends, upon which point the population will collapse dramatically. Based upon

this theory he predicted that the human population would continue to go through cycles of exponential growth, followed by sudden collapse.

When applying this theory to humans, Malthus added in a strong moral dimension. The lower classes tended to have more children, and he argued this was a sign of their moral degeneracy. Hence the population collapses that would be experienced through famines and environmental destruction were evidence of God punishing the poor for their immoral ways. This outlook proved particularly attractive to the ruling classes who could present famines among their subjects as part of the natural order of things, or even as an example of God's righteous wrath against sinners.

For example, during the Irish famine of the 1840's, English politicians were able to justify their lack of intervention in Malthusian terms - the famine being, after all, God's natural means of keeping the population in check and simultaneously punishing the sinners, rather than having anything to do with the policies of the government. As Malthus put it, "this constantly subsisting cause of periodical misery has existed ever since we have had any histories of mankind, does exist at present, and will for ever continue to exist". Thus the upper class continued to export food from Ireland as hundreds of thousands starved to death.

Today Malthus is a deeply discredited theorist. His intermingling of scientific observation with highly subjective moralising is obvious to us as nothing more than a crass justification of power and privilege without responsibility. However, perhaps more importantly, he turned out to be wrong. Since the time of

## The politics & reality of the peak oil scare.

Malthus, the human population has not suffered any of his predicted collapses. Instead the world's population has continued to grow and grow. From less than a billion in the 18th century, it has grown to over 6 billion today. This trend has been slowing but all the same the UN predicts that, on current trends, the world's population will be approaching 10 billion by 2050.

However, no matter how discredited the ideas of Malthus rightly are today, it is worth looking at the reasons why his predictions were so wrong. Firstly, we now know that population trends are much more complicated than Malthus imagined. However, we do know that in general, unless they are checked by predation or competition for resources, populations of species do tend to follow a basic Malthusian cycle of steady growth followed by sudden decline. For example, modern evolutionary biology provides plenty of evidence that the human population has collapsed to relatively tiny numbers - as few as thousands of people - on several occasions in the last 100,000 years.

However, modern humans have achieved a mastery over the earth, which allows us to consciously affect and increase our food supply. But Malthus was aware of this uniquely human trait, as he himself put it: "the main peculiarity which distinguishes man from other animals, is the means of his support, is the power which he possesses of very greatly increasing these means." So where exactly did he go wrong? Why has the population continued to increase at an ever-greater rate since his time, rather than collapsing as he predicted?

### Underestimating the power of humans to innovate

Malthus' basic scientific error was in underestimating the rate at which human ingenuity could increase the amount of resources available to them. Although Malthus and his peers in the ruling class were quite content to allow large chunks of the population to starve to death every so often, seeing this as God's will, many of those people threatened were not. The period since 1750 has been particularly marked out from the periods that came before by an almost constant scientific revolution.

As religion has waned in influence, people became less inclined to write off human ca-

tastrophes as God's will and instead were moved to look for the material causes of human suffering and ways to avoid them. Many of these advances have rested upon human beings' unique ability to cooperate in vastly complex social organisations and our ability to consciously adapt our behaviour. So, for example, the doubling of life expectancy in the West owes most to the enormous public health and sanitation infrastructure that has been built up in the last 100 years in the West, as well as to the collective applied brain-power of some of the brightest human minds over several centuries in order to devise the solutions upon which we depend.

**“Peak oil is a new Malthusian panic where access to energy is the limiting factor that access to food once was.”**

Malthus was wrong, human ingenuity overcame the iron laws of nature he claimed to discover. Peak oil is a new Malthusian panic where access to energy is the limiting factor that access to food once was. In the next section, we focus on energy as a limiting factor. The strongest part of the peak oil argument is that we are reaching the limits of conventional oil - this may be true. However, the arguments are flawed when they argue that there is no alternative to this oil. Making room for the human ingenuity that Malthus ignored, we will look in particular at the role of alternative energy resources and the use of 'unconventional' oil resources.

### Part B: Energy and the limits on growth

As some people have applied themselves to the problem of extracting resources from the world and turning them to human uses, others have been working out the basic laws of the universe and trying to understand our place within it. We know, for example, that our species is going to be basically limited to the resources of this planet for the foreseeable future. We also know that one of the fundamental resources upon which humans depend is energy.

The earth ultimately receives all of its en-

ergy from the nuclear reactions in the sun. The energy from the sun is generally very hard to efficiently capture and turn into a form that is useful, and the vast majority is either absorbed by the oceans or the atmosphere as heat and/or reflected back into space. However, a tiny fraction of the energy that the Earth has received from the sun over the last billion years has been trapped on the earth in the form of fossil fuels. These fuels are particular in that they are extremely easy to extract energy from - just add fire. Their organic nature also means that they are useful in other areas of the process of the transformation of sun-energy into human consumable energy - in particular petrochemicals which are crucial to modern fertilisers. Their nature of being relatively stable and easy to transport in normal atmospheric conditions makes them particularly suitable for transportation - another crucial part in the transformation of sun-energy into human consumable energy.

The big problem is that while we continue to relentlessly expand our use of the earth's resources, we can be absolutely certain that oil production will eventually peak. Based on the best available current data, this will happen sooner rather than later. Although, the exact timing of the peak in global conventional oil production - known as "peak oil" is heavily disputed - many credible scientists claim that it will happen within decades and several suggest that it may already have occurred.

### Why is Peak Oil a problem?

Of course oil will not suddenly run out one day, leaving all the petrol pumps dry. Instead it will reach a relatively sharp peak of production, beyond which it will be impossible to efficiently extract any more oil, and production will somewhat gradually decline from that point on. Under capitalism "efficiently extract" simply means the ability to make sufficient profit from the extraction. The major oil companies currently abandon productive fields when profit drops below 20%.<sup>(1)</sup> Oil fields are abandoned before they are empty for this reason.

The theory that peak oil was imminent was first put forward by US geo-physicist, M. King Hubbert as long ago as 1956. He predicted that oil production in the continental United States would peak between 1965 and 1970; and that world production would peak in 2000. His prediction proved slightly inaccurate, as US production actually peaked in 1971 and world oil

production will probably peak sometime after 2004. However, aside from the details of exactly when this peak would be reached, his predictions for the patterns of flow turned out to be largely accurate. According to the International Energy Agency's (IEA) World Energy Outlook 2004 Report:

"Fossil fuels currently supply most of the world's energy, and are expected to continue to do so for the foreseeable future. While supplies are currently abundant, they won't last forever. Oil production is in decline in 33 of the 48 largest oil producing countries, ..."

### Capitalist speculations

A clue that we are not facing the end of civilisation is found in the markets of capitalism. Oil is the major global commodity and, like other commodities, it is bought and sold on the markets years before it even comes out of the ground. If any section of capitalism secretly knew that a peak oil crisis was coming in the sort of worst case scenarios that are predicted, we can be sure that section would be seeking to make enormous profits out of this knowledge.

In the futures market this would be very simple to do. At the time(2) of writing, for instance, I can buy a barrel of Light Crude Oil on the New York MEX market for 65 dollars (3). This actually gives me that barrel of oil in December 2012 - 6 years away. And the price is only 3 dollars more than the price quoted for a barrel in January 2007.

Individual capitalists have made vast fortunes through spotting under priced future items and buying these in order to re-sell when the prices rises. In September 1992 George Soros sold short more than \$10bn worth of pounds sterling because he reckoned it was over valued. He was right, Sterling was forced out of the European Exchange Rate Mechanism and it is estimated Soros made at least \$1.1bn profit! In July 1997, with other speculators, he did something similar to Thailand triggering "Asia's worst financial crisis in decades". This illustrates that, even if the cost to capitalism as a whole through such behaviour will be a major economic crash, individual capitalists will still engage in such trades.

If any capitalist believed that oil supplies were going to crash they would realise

## "Our species is going to be basically limited to the resources of this planet for the foreseeable future"

that by buying say 100 million barrels today for 65 dollars they could make 1280 million if those barrels were worth say 200 dollars in 2012. And if the 2004 peak predictions are right, 200 dollars would be very little to pay for a barrel by 2012 - it could be that very much bigger profits could be made.

So why is it that no capitalist seems to believe in peak oil enough to put their money where their mouth is? Up to a couple of years back, ignorance might have been claimed as an explanation. But in recent months the idea of Peak Oil has been discussed in 'The Economist', probably the major international business magazine. Mathew Simmons, an energy adviser to George W. Bush, has published a book advocating Peak Oil theory, which has been widely reviewed in other publications. There is no longer any grounds to claim that peak oil theory is being hushed up.

So why is the future price of oil not shooting through the roof as capitalists speculate with the aim of making billions? Probably because very few are convinced, some even argue the opposite. The Economist in its article on the subject cites a report by Cambridge Energy Research Associates which "concludes that the world's oil-production capacity could increase by as much as 15m barrels per day (bpd) between 2005 and 2010 .. the biggest surge in history".(4)

From this and other articles, the counter point to the Peak Oil argument can be sketched as follows. The expansion of oil reserves in the future will rely on smaller fields and on technology extracting a much greater percentage of oil from existing fields - this is already happening in the North Sea. Rising oil prices will mean that it becomes economic to also access the vast unconventional Oil Deposits. Already major production has started out of the Oil Sands in Alberta and current prices of over 50 dollars a barrel mean that the vast Venezuela heavy tar deposits are now economic to exploit.

### Why is oil so important

The big scare claimed with peak oil theory is that there is absolutely no realistic prospect of us simply replacing all oil-sourced energy with an alternative energy source in the near future. But why call this a scare? Because replacing "all oil sourced energy" is not what is required. What is required is for a mixture of other fossil fuels (gas, coal), unconventional oil sources, alternative energy, and greater efficiency in energy use being able to take up whatever shortfall occurs when peak oil is reached. As the peak in conventional oil supply will really be a plateau, the point at which all or even most oil would have to be substituted will not occur for many decades.

To understand why oil is such an important substance to us, we need to examine the basic energy equation that defines the usefulness of fuels. Fuels are substances from which we can extract energy. However, it also costs a certain amount of energy to extract the fuel and to deliver it to where the energy is needed. The ratio between the amount of energy extracted in the fuel and the energy expended in extracting it is known as the Energy Returned on Energy Invested (EROEI)(5). If it takes more energy to extract the fuel than can be extracted from the fuel, the EROEI is less than 1. For example, hydrogen fuel cells have a EROEI of less than 0.9 - meaning that you can only get at most 90% of the energy back out that you put into making it. This means they are only of use for storing energy generated by other means, on their own they consume rather than supply energy. So while they may provide solutions to enable mass transport without oil in the future, hydrogen cells cannot provide energy per se.

EROEI is, of course, difficult to measure since the total amount of energy expended in the process must be considered. For example, one must include the amounts of energy expended in construction of dams, windmills, power stations, power cabling, access roads or nuclear plants. The fact that the industries concerned with generating this power have a vested interest in producing research that shows their technology to have a particularly good EROEI does not help in estimating this. And, on the other hand, proponents of Oil and Nuclear energy have a vested interest in showing 'alternative energies' not to be an alternative. How-

ever, regardless of how one looks at the figures, it is clear that oil was once in a class of its own.

### Plummeting EROEI

Oil discoveries in 1900 had an EROEI of over 100, meaning that for every barrel of oil that you used to find the oil, refine it and transport it to the customer, you got 100 barrels out of the ground in terms of energy. With fresh oil fields, little more was required than to drill a hole in the ground and pump the oil out. By the 1970's, as the oil in the most accessible areas became depleted, the EROEI had fallen to about 20(6). In other words the 1970's EROEI of oil was 20% of its 1900's value.

In terms of electricity production, hydroelectricity produces a significant net gain of energy, with an estimated EROEI of 10. However, the supply of rivers that can be usefully dammed to gain energy is already much closer to exhaustion than the oil supply. This is true for major dams, recently additional power has started to be generated through the construction of minor dams, which are similar to weirs(7).

On the supply side this means that a rising percentage of energy will come from alternative sources. Most importantly wind, wave, bio fuel and solar power. Wind power is already undergoing a rapid expansion - last year Denmark, the world leader, generated 23% of its electricity from wind power. Greenpeace estimates that by 2020 12% of the world's electricity consumption will come from wind power.(8)

### Alternative energy

Peak oil theorists alongside the Oil and Nuclear industries have been trying to debunk alternative energy sources. At one extreme of those who seek to gain from the politics of panic and fear, the British National Party claim in their peak oil study that the EROEI of wind has is about 2(9). Numbers like this tend to be reproduced again and again but they don't bear proper investigation. An overview article which looked at 41 different analyses found an operational EROEI for wind of 18, some 9 times this claimed figure.(10)

A major problem in discussing the feasibility of these sources is the very different facts presented by those who take one side of the debate as against another. Peak oil theo-



rists frequently claim solar panels require almost as much energy to construct as they supply in their lifetime, i.e. that their EROEI is close to 1. On the other hand, proponents of solar power claim EROEI's as high as 17 with payback for panels thus achieved in as little as 1.7 years.(11)

The low estimate EROEI figures are alarming but so in fact would the five fold drop in the EROEI of oil between 1900 and 1970 without the benefit of hindsight. Given these figures alone, and an idea of how important oil was to the economy, an alien observer might well guess that production had crashed by 1970. Instead it massively increased in that period - clearly there is a need for caution in assuming that even a future five fold drop in EROEI would automatically mean a similar crash in production.

This is leaving aside that this fivefold drop basically comes from selecting the estimates of EROEI most favourable to the idea of peak oil as a cataclysm. If, instead, you select the sort of estimates that show wind power to have a much better EROEI than oil you start to get a different story. The EROEI figures are massaged to put forward a convincing argument, but the more you examine them the less convincing that argument becomes.

### Is there more oil out there?

When you examine in detail the texts on Peak Oil, you realise that the peak predicted is for conventional oil. What does conventional oil mean? Basically conventional oil is what we all think of when we think of an oil field. It is the oil that can be obtained by drilling a hole in the ground and pumping out the liquid to be found there. Part of the reason the EROEI for oil was comparatively high in the 1900s was that the easiest fields then were actually under sufficient pressure to drive the oil out of the wells.

In addition to such conventional oil there are other sources, and the potential reserves in these are massive. They comprise oil that is very difficult to extract, typically because it is bound up in sand or shale deposits. Extracting this sort of oil is an operation more like open cast mining than conventional oil drilling. And the sand or shale extracted then has to be subjected to an energy intensive process to sweat the oil out. This currently gives EROEIs of up to 3(12). The largest deposits are in Venezuela and Canada, and these are already producing over a million barrels a day. It's estimated that these two deposits contain twice as much oil as all remaining conventional oil reserves, although only some of this is easily reached by strip mining.

## Other problems and solutions

It is argued that electric power is not nearly as useful as oil is. Electricity requires power cables, or bulky batteries, to be transported. There may be areas of the world's economy where there is no possibility of replacing oil with electricity as an energy supply. But the same factors actually give an advantage to solar and wind powered generation that can be generated on isolated sites of consumption not already on a power grid. The rapid development of plug-in hybrid cars and perhaps hydrogen fuel cells suggests that the use of electricity to power vehicles is a lot more feasible than initially thought.

On the demand side, rising prices have made large cars less affordable and encourage efficiencies in fuel economy. This means that demand for smaller cars and for hybrid cars will rise (home conversions have already demonstrated that up to 100 miles per gallon can be achieved with hybrids that can be plugged into the mains). Homes, offices and appliances will become more energy efficient and increasingly will generate at least some of the energy they consume through alternative technologies. The ratio of oil use to GDP (a measure of production) will continue to fall (even in the gas guzzling USA it halved between 1971 and 2002). This allows for limited economic expansion without additional quantities of energy as less energy is used per unit produced.

## Part C: The politics of the choice

The problem for anarchists is that these two separate possible futures are so different that it is hard to know how to judge where the truth might lie. The worst-case scenarios argued for Peak oil theory are essentially the end of civilisation as we know it. On the opposite extreme, there are still those who deny the possibility of any future long-term energy shortage. The complete lack of agreement even on the 'facts' that would seem to be straight forward - the EROEI's for convention and unconventional oils, solar and wind power - illustrate the great difficulty in choosing between these scenarios.

For understandable reasons, some anarchists have embraced peak oil theory because they simply believe the corporations are lying and cannot be trusted. However, for the reasons already outlined, even if this was the case we would expect indi-

# “The point at which all or even most oil would have to be substituted will not occur for many decades”

vidual greedy capitalists to be buying up 'cheap' oil futures, and so far there is no evidence for this.

So far the evidence is not there to uncritically support the peak oil predictions. Anarchists need to maintain a critical attitude to the whole debate. In the meantime we can use the debate itself as an educational tool. For instance, very few if any of the peak oil proponents seem to have thought about what the impact of peak oil would be on class society. The most common presentations of the outcome seem to see everyone suffering equally. But the reality that we know from every natural disaster is that most of the suffering falls on the working class, and that the cost of any solutions will also be imposed on the working class.

The fact that the likes of the BNP see something to be gained from creating a panic around peak oil should also give us pause for thought. Panics are not the atmosphere in which a libertarian society can easily be built. Rather panic and the fear of collapse of civilisation are precisely the requirements of dictatorship and fascism when it comes to forcing populations to accept that the boot on the neck is better than the alternatives.

We have seen Malthus was wrong because he underestimated human ingenuity. However, although it is tempting to attribute the deviation of human population figures from those Malthus predicted as purely being a consequence of the scientific revolution that coincided with it, it would be foolish not to note that the period since Malthus made the predictions also saw the transformation of social organisation in the guise of capitalism, which has today become so pervasive as to be almost invisible. For while the human ability to cooperate and innovate has provided the materials, capitalism determined the way they were used.

Consumerism is based upon people's desire to possess and consume resources and it provides a constant incentive for economic decision makers to extract more resources from the earth and to transform them into a form that is useful to humans. Thus, much of human innovation and scientific thought has been devoted to increasing the supply of resources available to the species and this has worked to such an extent that global food supply has consistently increased faster than the human population since Malthus's time.

This unprecedented increase in available resources can be seen as humans consciously diverting ever more of the world's resources towards themselves. This is not without its costs. Thus the last few centuries have seen our species actively shaping the planet's environment in order to provide this ever-greater supply of resources. We have transformed ecosystems, replaced continent-sized forests with farms, created vast areas of the world in which any impediments whatsoever, whether geological or biological, have been ruthlessly excluded. We have driven most of the species that might compete with us at the top of the food chain to the point of extinction.

Although it would be foolish to imagine that we have reached the limit of our innovations in terms of shaping the planet to our needs, this is an inherently risky route to take from the point of view of our species' survival. The earth's ecosystem and climate are unpredictable complex systems and could, at any stage, undergo dramatic change to arrive at a new point of equilibrium - a point that will probably be far less hospitable to our species - due to the unpredictable results of the dramatic changes that we are forcing upon the earth. In particular, most scientists believe that it is likely the atmospheric pollutants emitted by human industry may cause dramatic changes in our climate through what is known as global warming.

## The elephant in the living room

The energy debates provide a useful mechanism for exposing the irrationality of capitalism. For instance, the market will decide the balance between supply and demand solutions to energy needs. Yet the most profitable solutions - like using unconventional oil resources - may also be the ones that require vast quantities of energy to extract and which in themselves, and because of this, will result in massive additional

# The politics & reality of the peak oil scare.

releases of CO2. Almost certainly if the population of the world was to decide on how to best fill our energy needs we would not take the path it looks like the market will dictate.

This is the key point. Whether or not the peak in conventional oil is imminent or decades away, the method in which capitalism will fulfil its energy needs will be irrational when looked at from the viewpoint of the future needs of the people of the planet. It could well be that the route to securing greatest profit for capital is that of exploiting the unconventional oil deposits. In that context feeding the panic about energy supply, and in particular the idea that renewable energy cannot be an alternative, is a very serious mistake as it would encourage many people to accept what would be a very polluting source of energy over efficient and renewable energies.

The greatest threat to most humans is not peak oil but rather global warming. Changing weather patterns and rising sea levels already threaten hundreds of millions of the poorest people on the planet. In that context, there is a real danger of peak oil hysteria simply playing the role of a distraction from the need to make real rational decisions about energy production.

The sort of energy debate anarchists need to be promoting is not that of conspiracy theories and collapse-ism. In the anti-war movement, conspiracy theories around the 9/11 attacks may grab the popular imagination, but they are a serious bar-

rier to any real discussion of imperialism, the causes of the war and how it can be opposed. So it is with Peak Oil and the struggle that needs to be waged against climate change.

We need to help initiate a debate about a real program that people can fight for in relation to climate change. A program that can offer real solutions to filling our need for energy, but ones that do not lead to severe damage to the biosphere which we share.

In the medium term capitalism's con-

tinuous need to grow also means that the danger of some key resource running out before an alternative could be developed will always be with us. As will the danger of some by-product of production resulting in a drastic change in the suitability of the planet for human life. As the world's population increases, any major sudden change could result in the deaths of billions of people. The need for a rational system of economic organisation based on human needs, including the need for an environment, which can support all of us, becomes more urgent with every day.



by Andrew Flood and Chekov Feeney

1 The hidden agenda; framework for an alternative oil policy, A Norwegian trade union perspective on the internationalisation of Statoil, translated by Laurence Cox

2 December 2006

3 You can see current prices on the NYMEX futures market at <http://futures.tradingcharts.com/marketquotes/>

4 Why the World is not about to run out of oil, The Economist, April 20th, 2006

5 There is a useful explanation of EROEI on Wikipedia at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/EROEI>

6 Although an EROEI for oil of 20 is commonly given it may not be accurate. Middle Eastern oil has the highest EROEI and I've seen estimates in the range of 10-20. I've seen figures for Oil produced in the USA on the other hand as low as 2!

<http://www.microhydropower.net/casestudies/>

8 Why Wind energy, Energy Research Centre of the Netherlands, <http://www.ecn.nl/en/wind/additional/why-wind-energy/>

9 <http://www.bnp.org.uk/peakoil/alterwind.htm>

10 Energy return on investment (EROI) for wind energy at [http://www.eoearth.org/article/Energy\\_return\\_on\\_investment\\_\(EROI\)\\_for\\_wind\\_energy](http://www.eoearth.org/article/Energy_return_on_investment_(EROI)_for_wind_energy)

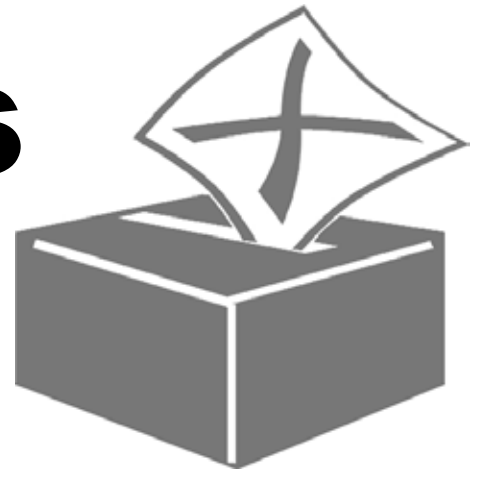
11 Energy Research Centre of the Netherlands <http://tinyurl.com/y8jvdg>

12 Actual figures I've seen claimed range from 0.7 to 17. Shell reported an EROEI for one oil shale extraction of 3.5, see <http://www.csbj.com/story.cfm?ID=9271>

7 For examples of micro hydro power see



# Anarchists & Elections



The Workers Solidarity Movement, along with anarchist organisations throughout the world, refuses to take part in parliamentary elections. Is it not downright weird, or even hypocritical, when anarchists claim to want more democracy than anyone else? Is this a rejection of democracy? **Alan MacSimoin** tries to answer some of the questions that arise again and again.

## So, what's your problem with voting?

What problem? We've no problem with voting. How do you think we make decisions? We discuss proposals and then register how many are in favour and how many against; or, in plain English, we vote. We do this all the time in our own anarchist organisations, in our unions, in our community groups.

## But you won't stand candidates for the Dail, Stormont or Westminster, you won't even vote in any of those elections.

We anarchists want a society where the division of people into bosses and workers, rulers and ruled, is ended. So, we have no interest in choosing who will be our rulers. It's pretty ABC, you might as well ask a teetotaler if she wants a pint of Guinness or one of Beamish. This electoral process involves the mass of working people relying on a few representatives to enter parliament and do battle on their behalf. Our sole involvement is one of voting every few years and perhaps canvassing and supporting the party through donations or whatever.

Anarchists do not believe any real socialist / anarchist society can come about through the good actions of a few individuals. If a few can grant us freedom then a few can also take our freedom away. Anarchism is about real participative democracy - based on delegation rather than representation with delegates being elected only to implement specific decisions. Delegates would not have the right to go against the mandate of those who elected them. Delegates would enjoy no special rights or privileges and, unlike TDs or MPs, would be subject to instant recall and dismissal if they

disobey their mandate. This idea is obviously the complete opposite to the parliamentary idea. We do not seek a few leaders, good, bad or indifferent to sort out the mess that is capitalism. Indeed we argue constantly against any ideas that make it seem such elites are necessary.

## So why do you call on people to vote in referendums such as the referendum on citizenship in 2003, the one you called the "racist referendum", or referendums on the European Union?

There is a big difference between voting in order to make a decision and voting for someone to whom we will hand over decision-making. That's why we threw ourselves into the referenda on children's, divorce and abortion rights. We went out knocking on doors, putting up posters, organising public meetings, speaking on TV and radio, and leafleting our neighbourhoods. Referenda are closer to anarchist ideas of direct democracy and are, while flawed, far better than electing a politician to office once every few years.

## Even if you don't agree with the current system, you could use elections as a platform for your ideas.

Yes, it could certainly be argued that we could. BUT it would come at a price - and a very costly price. We would certainly get a few minutes every now and again to say our piece, we might even get the very occasional favourable mention in the newspapers. But the cost of this would be to re-inforce the clientism and passivity which is an inherent part of the electoral system. Elections are about leaving the vast majority of people in the role of passive observer of politi-

cal life rather than active participant. Anarchists want to see working class people take an active role in bringing about change in society. Participation in electoral politics has the opposite effect. The cost is too high a price to pay.

## But wouldn't it help to build a mass movement if we had people in parliament?

Talk about putting the cart before the horse. What mass movement has ever been built by having TDs or MPs? To get socialists elected implies that there are already a lot of voters who understand and agree with socialism, otherwise why would they vote for a socialist candidate? Even on a local scale, look at the election of anti-hospital closure TDs like Paudge Connolly in Monaghan. He was elected because the run down of the health service was already a burning issue and thousands had taken to streets. His election was a result, not the cause. And it didn't stop the rundown of Monaghan hospital.

The downside of his election is that it reinforced the idea that engaging in 'real politics' is the way to get things done. And our rulers just love that, it moves us back to passivity and dependence. We can support our 'representative' as opposed to putting on real pressure by means of direct action like strikes and blockades.

## And why can't you do both?

For starters, electioneering almost always results in the party using it gradually becoming more moderate. In order to gain votes, the party must appear "realistic" and "practical" and that means working within the system. If you use language like 'socialism', 'class struggle' and 'revolution', it is said you will frighten off potential voters. It's a lot easier to leave any mention of it out of your election leaflets rather than having to

explain that it simply means a complete change, and not some gang of demented maniacs marching through streets awash with blood. And that's just one example. You end up trying not to offend your potential electorate, rather than trying to convince them of your radically different ideas.

History is littered with examples of parties which started off from the position of combining parliamentary and extra-parliamentary politics but which became part of the system. From Marxian Social Democracy at the turn of the 19th/20th century right through to the German Green Party in the early years of this decade, we have seen example after example of radical parties starting off from the position of declaring the need for direct action and extra-parliamentary action. Indeed they often refer to their electoral involvement as the least important part of their strategy. In every single example, however, the parties involved have ended up considering the gathering of votes as more important than the message. The revolutionary slogans and policies eventually get watered down in order not to offend potential voters, the elected 'representative' loses touch with the real world.

And even if a political party or organisation approaches elections from a purely cynical point of view – i.e. with no illusions in the system, with no real interest in getting elected but wanting to use the tactic of standing in elections to provide them with a soapbox – and even if that political organisation manages to avoid the watering-down of its message, there is still a fundamental problem. What message is being given to the electorate – is it 'Get involved, fight back, make a difference' or is it 'Get involved and support us to make a difference'? As I've said already, it's impossible to be involved in the electoral process without re-inforcing passivity and clientilism.

The campaign against the bin tax in Dublin is a prime example of a campaign which became subservient to the electoral ambitions of various political parties. In several areas the development of the campaign was stunted by the fact that certain individuals who were going to be standing in the election wanted to be the principal spokesperson and organiser – 'leader' if you like – of the campaign in that area. So trying to combine campaigning

### “It's impossible to be involved in the electoral process without re-inforcing passivity and clientilism”

and electoralism will inevitably lead to the campaigning becoming subservient to the electioneering.

#### **But it doesn't have to be like that, you can't deny that the vote for Joe Higgins in Dublin West helped to beat the water charges?**

Well, I can. It was mass non-payment that defeated the water charges. His own Socialist Party agrees with us on that. Getting a few individuals elected is not what scares governments. If it were, the election of anti-health cuts TDs like Jerry Cowley and Paudge Connolly would have seen hospital wards reopened and waiting lists slashed. It hasn't, draw your own conclusion. While we are talking about Joe, I want to say that he is held in high regard by many anarchists as an honest and selfless socialist. And I say this even though Joe's existence makes it a bit harder for anarchists – it's easy to point at him and say “if only we could have a government of people like Joe wouldn't it be so much better?” And it sure would! But there's a problem. For every Joe there's a Tommy Sheridan... or a Pat Rabbitte... or someone else who thinks he or she is bigger or more important than their mandate.

And even if the power and wealth doesn't go to their heads, people may change their politics. Once elected, politicians are free to do as they please until the next election. There is no mechanism for enforcing the mandate or withdrawing support if the elected person does not hold to his/her mandate. We have to hand over our decision making to someone we have no effective control over. Society remains divided into order-givers and order-takers.

It could of course also be argued that the political system will always tolerate one or two Joe Higginases. In fact his existence as a TD serves quite a useful purpose – the establishment can point at Joe as an example which proves that their democracy

works. 'After all it can accommodate views right across the political spectrum from Michael McDowell to Joe Higgins' might be their mantra. But have you ever thought about how the establishment might react if there were a dozen TDs like Joe Higgins? Or if there was any danger of a government being elected on a radical socialist platform? How would international capital react? How long do you think it would take multinational capital to effectively shut down the Irish economy?

As Emma Goldman pointed out, “if the anarchists were strong enough to swing the elections to the Left, they must also have been strong enough to rally the workers to a general strike.” If we're to bring about change, if we're to take on the might of international capital we can only do so in the context of politicisation and direct involvement of the mass of working class people. It can never happen as long as the mass of people remain passive observers or supporters.

#### **Does this mean anarchists are just negative, that we should put all our energy into anti-election campaigns?**

We don't see this as an important activity at all. Our aim is not to have elections where only 10% vote, that would be meaningless in itself. In the U.S.A. only about 30% vote in most elections and it is possible that up to 50% of the population is not even registered to vote. Only someone whose brain is missing, however, would claim this meant the U.S. was more anarchist than Ireland. Not voting may just be a sign of despair (“what's the point”). We want working people actively organising and struggling for the alternative.

What we will do is use the opportunity of a time when people are talking a little more about politics to challenge the notion that important decisions can only be made by a very few, whether they be elected politicians or unelected business tycoons; and put across our anarchist ideas.

The amount of our energy that anarchists put in to specific anti-election campaigns is tiny compared to the amount of time we spend campaigning. Since the last election in the 26-Counties, anarchists in the WSM, as well as producing 24 issues of our newspaper Workers Solidarity (distributing 6,000 copies of each issue) and 7 issues of this magazine, have been involved in huge numbers of

campaigns – Shell to Sea, Justice for Terence Wheelock, anti-racism, anti bin tax, workers' rights, trade union work. If you look back through issues of our paper or look at our website ([www.wsm.ie](http://www.wsm.ie)) you'll get something of a flavour. So far from spending huge amounts of energy on anti-election campaigns, the vast majority of our work is aimed at encouraging the involvement of working class people in fighting for their rights, in real political interaction in other words.

### **If more people abstained it would just lead to the right winning elections, more DUP and PD type politicians.**

Possibly. However anarchists don't just say "don't vote", we say "organise" as well. Apathy is something we have no interest in encouraging.

If a sizeable number of working class people refused to participate in the electoral charade but became actively involved in their trade unions, in community groups and in campaigns actively fighting for change, whichever party was in office would have to rule over a country in which a sizeable minority had rejected government as such. This would mean that the politicians would be subjected to real pressures from people who believed in their own power and acted accordingly. So anarchists call on people not to vote for governments and, instead, organise themselves and be conscious of their own collective power. This can curb the power of government in a way that millions of crosses on bits of paper never will.

### **But, even if the present set-up isn't perfect, surely you are in favour of democratic rights?**

The right to the vote is just one element in the hard won struggles of workers (and suffragettes!) over the last couple of hundred years. Democratic rights - in short the ability to organise and promote alternative ideas - were an important gain and one that is well worth defending.

Obviously it is preferable to live in a parliamentary democracy rather than a dictatorship. We don't see any significant immigration into North Korea, Iran or Belarus, but many people are prepared to risk a lot in the hope of getting into Canada, the Netherlands or Ireland. It's not just about the prospect of having a better standard of living, it's also about having more liberty.

Even the most flawed democracies are forced to make concessions that dictatorships do not, such as a certain amount of free speech, less censorship, rights for women and gays, a degree of independence for trade unions, letting people come together in organisations to seek changes in the way society is run, and so on.

However we are not naive and we do realise that none of these are absolutes. What we call 'rights' can be taken away as well as conceded. The level of freedom we enjoy is set by how much the bosses need to give in order to keep the majority content, plus the amount that is forced from them through struggle. None of the rights we now enjoy were simply handed down as gifts by our rulers, they all had to be struggled for. In democratic societies life is better and it easier to engage in such struggles. That's why we are all in favour of defending the 'democratic rights' we now have. As Mikhail Bakunin put it "the most imperfect republic is a thousand times better than even the most enlightened monarchy."

### **And your alternative is what?**

By using direct action we can force politicians to respect the wishes of the people. For example, if a government or boss tries to limit free speech, then anarchists would try to encourage a free speech fight to break the laws in question until such time as they were revoked. In the case of environmental destruction, anarchists would support and encourage attempts at halting the damage by mass trespassing on sites, blocking the routes of developments, organising strikes and so on. If a boss refuses to introduce a shorter working day, then workers should join a union and go on strike or stop working after 7 hours.

Similarly, strikes combined with social protest would be an effective means of stopping authoritarian laws being passed. For example anti-union laws would be best fought by strike action and community boycotts. The

example of the water charges in the 26 counties in the late 1990s shows the power of such direct action. The government could happily handle hours of speeches by opposition politicians but they could not ignore social protest.

As Noam Chomsky argues, "within the constraints of existing state institutions, policies will be determined by people representing centres of concentrated power in the private economy, people who, in their institutional roles, will not be swayed by moral appeals but by the costs consequent upon the decisions they make -- not because they are 'bad people,' but because that is what the institutional roles demands." He continues by arguing that "those who own and manage the society want a disciplined, apathetic and submissive public that will not challenge their privilege and the orderly world in which it thrives. The ordinary citizen need not grant them this gift. Enhancing the Crisis of Democracy by organisation and political engagement is itself a threat to power, a reason to undertake it quite apart from its crucial importance in itself as an essential step towards social change."

So, far from doing nothing, by not voting the anarchist actively encourages alternatives. As the British anarchist John Turner, General Secretary of the United Shop Assistants Union back in the 1890s argued, anarchists "have a line to work upon, to teach the people self-reliance, to urge them to take part in non-political [i.e. non-electoral] movements directly started by themselves for themselves . . . as soon as people learn to rely upon themselves they will act for themselves . . .

We teach the people to place their faith in themselves, we go on the lines of self-help. We teach them to form their own committees of management, to repudiate their masters, to despise the laws of the country. . . ." In this way we encourage self-activity, self-organisation and self-help -- the opposite of apathy and doing nothing.

## **Parliament or Democracy?**

The anarchist argument is very well put in 'Parliament or Democracy' by Kevin Doyle at [http://struggle.ws/once/pd\\_intro.html](http://struggle.ws/once/pd_intro.html) or €3.00 (inc. postage) from the WSM, P.O. Box 1528, Dublin 8.





# Rossport

*Interview with WSM member living in Rossport*

**As we go to press (early January 2007) the campaign against Shell's attempts to force a high-powered gas pipeline through the Rossport area of Co. Mayo continues (see <http://www.corribsos.com> for details of the Shell to Sea campaign or <http://www.indymedia.ie> for news reports). The Rossport Solidarity Camp was established in the summer of 2005 and since then has provided an important focus for campaigners travelling to Mayo to support the local struggle. Here we speak to Sean Mallory, a WSM member who has spent a considerable amount of time at the camp, about his experiences. Please note that the views expressed are his own and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Camp.**

**Can you give a brief overview of the Shell to Sea Struggle so far?**

Shell to Sea is opposing the Corrib gas project that proposes to build an on-shore gas refinery nine kilometres inland. This refinery is connected to a gas well out at sea by a production pipeline (contains raw gas). This type of pipeline has never been built before. If ever constructed, it would pass within seventy metres of people's homes.

The initial community campaign opposed the project on health and safety grounds but the campaign analysis has now widened to encompass a critique of democracy in Ireland. This critique also incorporates a critique of the privatisation. The gas fields were given to Shell, Statoil and Marathon pretty much for free including tax write-offs etc. The five-demand charter of the campaign includes a call to renegotiate the deal that gave the multinationals such great terms.

The campaign began in 1999 when the original development plans were finalised. The struggle at that point was through planning authorities and other governmental bodies. By 2005 all appeals through the legal process and the community were exhausted in failure. Decisions in favour of the campaign were overturned and manipulated. Shell and their partners also began the preparatory works at the proposed terminal site.

In June 2005 Shell attempted to start laying the production pipeline through land belong to local farmers. A number of farmers resisted this by blocking a road that Shell needed to access the land. The State gave Shell an injunction, which said that the community had to allow the trucks through. When the community continued their protest, five farmers were imprisoned for 94 days.

This totally backfired on the State

and Shell. The campaign grew more militant. In response to the jailing, the community shut down all Shell's sites. The five prisoners were released, on the eve of a national protest, following intense national and international pressure. The campaign did not stop its daily pickets against Shell and these continued for 18 months until they were forcibly broken by 200 gardai in November 2006. Since then the campaign has faced a vicious campaign of intimidation, harassment and physical abuse from the gardai.

### **When did activists like yourself get involved?**

In June 2005 a gathering was organised by activists from the libertarian movement in Ireland in Rossport. This was on the back of a few individuals building up a relationship with the campaign over the previous months. This gathering was a great success with community activists giving talks and showing people what the issue was about. Contacts were swapped and a few weeks later, in the run up to the jailing, some farmers asked for more on the ground support. A handful of people went and started to lend their support and slowly numbers grew and we set up a camp in late July 2005.

### **Were you local to the area?**

None of us were from the immediate locality; two people were from the same county, living in a town 50 miles away.

### **What was your initial view or perception of community politics?**

I had no experience of working in community-based activism. I had finished college and the only major political involvement I had had was in preparation for the G8 summit in Scotland. I didn't know what to expect. In one way I arrogantly considered myself as a "political activist". I thought I was getting involved in something where I would learn nothing and was imparting knowledge - an expert if you will. This idea was very soon dispelled

**“In Rossport we didn't go screaming from the rooftops “I'm an anarchist” but at the same token, we are honest about it.”**

and I very soon realised that I was going to learn more about activism from the community campaigners than my few years' experience could offer them.

I quite soon began to see libertarian tendencies in the community struggle. These were aspects of libertarianism that most people innately have in them such as solidarity, mutual aid and standing up to authority. This is not to argue the community was libertarian: far from it, just these aspects were obvious to see. There were also problems, which we saw too. People had trust in the state institutions, such as the police, because most people had never really interacted with them before. This was learned the hard way - by the end of a baton and a boot. But this experience of community politics forever broke me from the myth that there is only one method or path of progressive struggle against capital.

### **How did you feel getting involved in a community coming from activist-based anarchist experience?**

When I first went to Rossport I was paranoid about coming from a libertarian-left anarchist movement. How would people take our involvement? However in many ways this was a perception in my head rather than a real problem. In being involved in college politics and anti-G8 protest, we often get taken up by what the upper classes think of us when we read their press, listen to their radio programs, watch their T.V. We read in the papers how we are something to fear and how we are vicious and threatening. At times anarchists indulge in this so as to feel important. This makes us paranoid,

very under-confident in our politics, when dealing with local communities because we sometimes assume they have a similar view of us as the mainstream media. But there is no reason to have this attitude.

In Rossport we didn't go screaming from the rooftops “I'm an anarchist” but at the same token, we are honest about it. That's what people are most impressed with, by the fact that we are honest with them. There are no backroom deals. We say what we think. We act in solidarity as opposed to off our own bat. We don't carry out actions on our own and I think that this has led to a trust. Of course some people in the community politically disagree with us but that is the nature of life and community politics. I'm sure there are people who question our motivation and suspect some non-existent sinister underlying motive. But the majority respect the solidarity we have given them.

### **What problems have you encountered?**

When I came to this from activism, I assumed most people in a meeting would have a similar understanding of jargon and be at a similar political level. This of course is not true. In a community, by its nature, you have people from all backgrounds and all different life experiences. This is very obvious in Erris where a lot of people have emigrated and since returned and experienced many things while in England, Europe or the US. In local meetings it can at times be difficult and frustrating but a major lesson I learned was that, if people are given time to adjust and not pressurised, they often rise to the occasion.

### **How democratic is the campaign?**

There are between one and two community meetings a week, depending on the campaign pressures. Anyone can attend these meetings and no one is denied access (bar the media occasionally). The issue of democracy is a thorny one. When we arrived in June 2005, there was no community forum.

There were just informal meetings in people's houses. In August 2005, regular meetings started to be held. There has never been proper chairing of these meetings and no decision-making structure has been agreed. Therefore working in the campaign can be quite a minefield. This structure served us well when the campaign was quiet. It was almost nothing more than a report back forum and there were rarely any contentious issues. We always failed to have a discussion on long-term strategy, although it was continually raised over the summer. The problem was that the structure couldn't allow decisions like these to be made. When the police broke the picket (see news reports on [www.indymedia.ie](http://www.indymedia.ie) or [www.corribsos.ie](http://www.corribsos.ie)) the structure, or indeed structurelessness, was totally inept. We couldn't make decisions either quickly or democratically.

The camp activists certainly collectively aspire to a more democratic structure, but in reality we failed miserably to make it happen. There was no firm decision-making structure; there wasn't any proper chairing or facilitation. Meetings didn't even follow an agenda. We in the camp have on countless times tried to address this but to no avail.

This is not to say that nobody has his or her say. In times of crisis events have

moved too fast and people have held informal meetings at the picket. We are currently beginning a process, which many people hope will deliver a structure. It is slow and a case of one step back two steps forward but now we have agendas and minutes which is a step forward.

In tandem with this the issue of a national structure is trying to be rectified. There has been a bit of mistrust between the Erris community and some of the national groups and it is a difficult issue to sort out. It is largely based on miscommunication. This has been manipulated by the Socialist Workers Party who have tried to heighten the divide and make gains for themselves by trying to portray the national groups as hostile to the Erris groups.

### **What problems does the campaign face now?**

The police at the moment pose a major problem. They can beat us black and blue and our bruises will heal, but fear is a much bigger thing to overcome. I think it is easier for those of us who expected this reaction from the state and perhaps have been in confrontational situations before to deal with this. However if fear gets into the community it will be difficult to challenge. You cannot argue logically against fear like you can against a conservative standpoint. Fear is

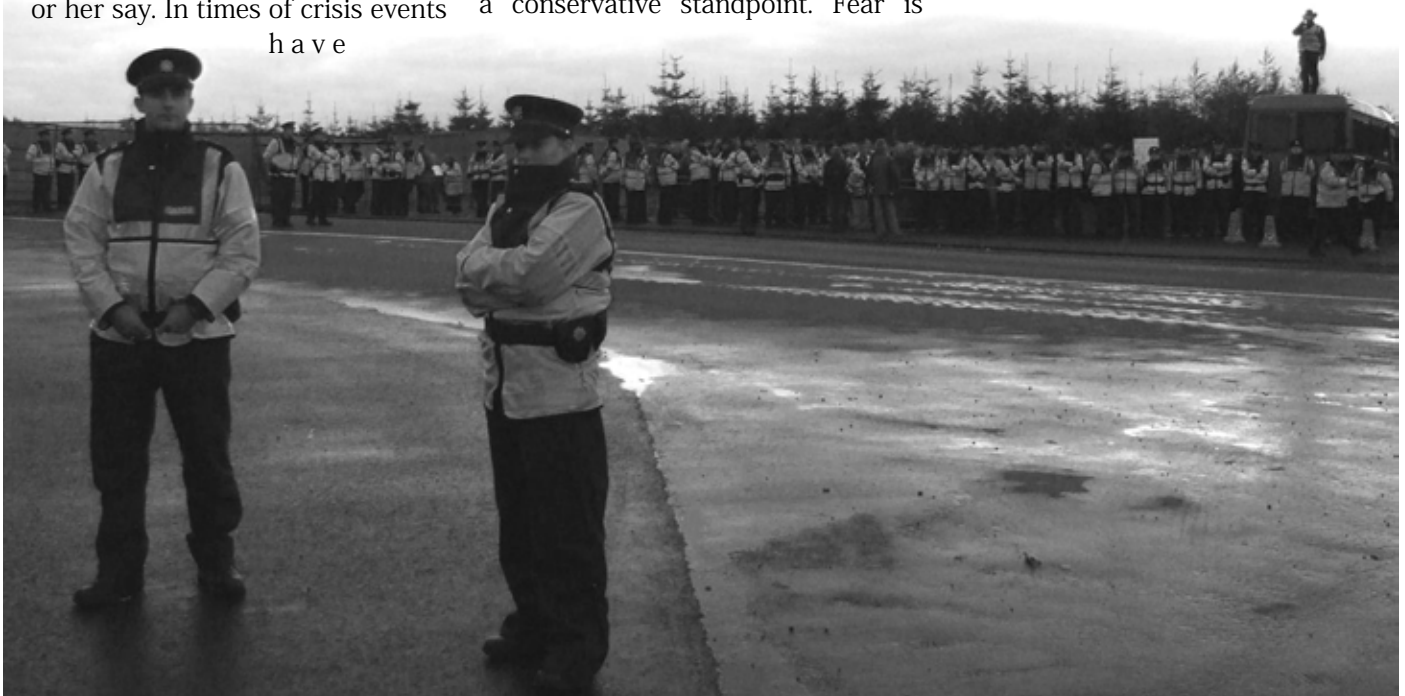
something different. It is difficult to admit that you are afraid. Both people in the local community and, to a lesser extent, activists suffer from this difficulty. It is the aim of the state campaign to intimidate us. We are aware of this and while we have made errors in dealing with it, by no means has it overcome us.

### **Why is the Rossport struggle important to you?**

It might seem like I'm presenting the community as an ideal community engaged in struggle against authoritarianism, the state and corporate power but nothing could be further from the truth. The people of Erris and the wider area are just normal people; farmers, fishermen, builders, whatever. They experience problems, make good decisions, bad decisions. But surely for libertarians that's what it's all about - ordinary people trying to run their lives by taking back their problems from the state and attempting to solve them.

**- Sean Mallory**

[www.shelltosea.com](http://www.shelltosea.com)  
<http://struggle.ws/rsc/>



# Direct Action Gets The Goods



## But How?

By Gregor Kerr

Elsewhere in this magazine (see 'Anarchists and Elections') the anarchist case against participation in elections is outlined. The alternative political strategy put forward by anarchists is the use of direct action. This article sets out to examine what is meant by the concept of direct action and also to argue that it is impossible to combine electoralism and direct action, that by its nature electoralism is disempowering, and that real direct action and participation in elections are mutually exclusive.

Politics in Ireland and elsewhere is dominated by clientelism. People see themselves as needing politicians to "do stuff" for them. The politicians who are most successful are those who play the clientelist game most effectively. And left wing or socialist parties and candidates who decide to play the electoral game find themselves drawn into this clientelist game as well. This has huge implications in terms of how they approach campaigning work.

Many left-wing activists will argue that it is possible to combine campaigning and participation in elections. The reality however is different. Because of the way in which the electoral system works, the person who is going to be the election candidate has to be the 'face' of the campaign, has to be the main spokesperson, has to be seen to be the driving force of the campaign. Thus campaigns can often become the opposite of encouraging mass participation, campaigners are treated as 'followers' or 'supporters' of the election candidate not as equal participants.

Thus the very participation in electoral politics re-enforces the concept of clientelism, and endorses – whether deliberately or not – a political system based on rulers and ruled, leaders and led. Anarchism is about building a different type of political system – one that rejects that notion and that attempts to build a society based on power from below – one whereby people take responsibility for their own decisions and for their own actions. One of the principal tactics for getting to such a society is through the use of direct action – whereby people are encouraged to take responsibility for and ownership of their own struggles and to reject the concept that 'someone else' will sort out our problems for us.

### Definition

According to the Wikipedia definition 'Direct action is a form of political activism which seeks immediate remedy for perceived ills, as opposed to indirect actions such as electing representatives who promise to provide remedy at some later date.'

The Anarchist FAQ (see <http://www.diy-punk.org/anarchy/secJ2.html>) states 'Basically, direct action means that instead of getting someone else to act for you (e.g. a politician) you act for yourself. Its essential feature is an organised protest by ordinary people to make a change by their own efforts.' Anarchists have always been exponents of direct action as a political tactic. Not only is direct action most often the most effective tactic to use in a political struggle but also – and just as importantly - direct action is about empowering people, it's about breaking from dependency on others to run our lives. Rather than pleading with our bosses or electing 'better' politicians to make decisions for us, it means ordinary people coming together to win change through our own efforts.

But, as well as seeing it as an effective tactic in the here and now, anarchists see direct action as a preparation for the type of new society we are trying to build. Central to anarchist belief is that the means leads to the ends. If we are to create a free society built on real grassroots democracy from the bottom up, a lot of people will have to be involved. Huge numbers of people will have to believe that together they themselves are capable of overthrowing the present system and building, developing and defending a different type of society.

Through engaging in direct action we all can learn, through direct involvement, that there is no need to leave things to 'experts' or professional politicians. We can discover how to organise our own campaigns, how to devise strategies, how to build links with others, how to develop feelings of mutual interest and solidarity -we learn that there is strength in numbers, that by linking up with others who are concerned about the same issue We make ourselves so much stronger. After all, there is no point in refusing to pay the bin tax if you don't try to convince your neighbour to oppose it as well, there's no point in getting your neighbour to boycott it if people in all the other areas are una-

ware of the campaign and continue paying.

Direct action – whether that's a work-to-rule or strike in the workplace or a campaign which involves the non-payment of the bin tax – leads to the development of ideas of solidarity and mutual aid. This in turn leads to the development of political self-confidence among those directly involved. If we want to develop that new free society, that level of self-confidence is a pre-requisite.

### Nothing mysterious

But what exactly is 'direct action'? The answer to this is that while there's nothing mysterious about what constitutes direct action, it can take many forms. In the workplace, it's everything from work-to-rule to strike action. In the community or in campaigns it's everything from refusing to pay bin charges to taking a hammer to the nose of a plane in Shannon to blockading the Shell terminal in Mayo. The common characteristic is that it involves people doing something for themselves, and not relying on someone else – be that a politician, a trade union official or a community 'leader' to act on their behalf.

The growth of libertarian and anarchist politics in Ireland and elsewhere in recent years has seen 'direct action' as a political tactic gain currency and popularity. Some of the most prominent examples of direct action on the Irish political landscape in recent years have been the decommissioning of U.S. troop-carrying planes at Shannon airport and the community resistance to the installation of a high pressure gas pipeline in the Erris area of Co. Mayo. The words 'direct action' and 'Non Violent Direct Action' have entered the political lexicon of practically all political activists.

These two particular examples provide us with an interesting comparison. The first – the attacks on planes in Shannon carried out by the Pitstop Ploughshares 5 (see <http://www.peacecentral.com>) and by Mary Kelly - involved small group or individual action. The second – the protests against Shell's pipeline in Mayo (see <http://www.corribsos.com>) – involve attempts to include as many people as possible in collective action. Small group and individual direct actions are in themselves effective means of protest, they give hope, they

show us that resistance is possible and effective. On the negative side, however, they leave the majority in the role of spectators and supporters. It is the involvement of large numbers of people in direct action protests which is the type of action that we most favour.

This involvement helps to break down the distinctions between ‘activists’ and the ordinary person. It encourages everyone to become centrally involved in taking action him/herself rather than relying on someone else. Such participation is of itself empowering. Certainly participation in a successful mass direct action shows somebody quite vividly their own power and the collective strength of people banding together to demand their rights. But, even if unsuccessful, such participation has nevertheless taught the participants a huge amount about collectivity and strength. The knowledge of skills and tactics and the confidence gained will ensure that in future cases people will look to that same collective strength instead of relying on the clientelist approach to politics.

### Mass direct action

On 1st March 2003, the Grassroots Network Against War controversially organised what it billed a mass direct action at Shannon airport. The call-out for the protest stated “We will attempt to engage in a mass trespass at Shannon airport. This action will be an example of mass non-violent civil disobedience in the tradition of Gandhi’s salt march. It will be a purely peaceful protest. We intend to signal our opposition to US warplanes refueling at Shannon airport and to indicate that we refuse to sit back while our government, acting in our names, gives material assistance to a war that will be both brutal and unjust.” (see <http://struggle.ws/wsm/news/2003/GNAWplansMARCH1.html>)

While it was to be expected that the media and mainstream politicians would react with near hysteria to the announced plans, what was not so expected was that most of the left and the Irish Anti War Movement were almost more hysterical and negative in their reaction. This resulted in an intense debate among activists as to whether the plans should have been announced publicly. Some argued that by making such a public call for the protest we played into the hands of our opponents allowing them to create a hype about ‘violent protest’. The counter argument was put succinctly in a subsequent issue of Workers Solidarity,

“In the afterglow of February 15th it was reasonable to assume that a couple of thousand would show up at Shannon. The reason for publicising it was to encourage the maximum number of participants in the direct action itself. The plan to tear the fence down was dependent largely on numbers. The fact that the numbers didn’t materialise was disappointing, and all the publicity, far more than expected, probably served to scare away people rather than attract them.

If people don’t know about an event then they we can’t expect them to participate. Open publication of the plan allows people to make an informed decision about the extent of their involvement. It minimises the chances of them being drawn into events they are uncomfortable with.” (<http://struggle.ws/wsm/ws/2003/ws75/da.html>)

Mass involvement in direct action builds a feeling of strength and solidarity which cannot be achieved by small group or individual action. All most of us can do in the situation of someone or a small group who carries out an individual act of sabotage or direct protest is to offer support and solidarity to that person or group. It leaves us in the position of being cheerleaders/supporters for the actions of others rather than opening up the possibility of our own direct involvement. And if we want to get maximum involvement from as many people as possible, it is self-evident that this cannot be organised in a clandestine or secret manner. It is interesting indeed that 3 and a half years later when the Shell to Sea campaign organised days of action in Mayo with the explicitly stated aim of stopping work on the Shell terminal at Bellanaboy, this debate didn’t even happen. It was just taken for granted that calls for mass participative direct action was the way to go.

As this article is being written, controversy rages about the fact that the local campaign has stepped back from these mass participation direct action protests in the face of extreme police brutality. But there is no debate about the fact that the campaign tactic of mass participative direct action has been strengthening and empowering. Compared to the serious controversy engendered by the proposal of such a tactic in Shannon in March 2003, it seems that political debate has moved considerably and that ‘direct action’ as a tactic has moved closer to centre-stage.

### Strike action

One of the other controversies at the time of the proposed Shannon action in March ’03 was the contention that the action would make the organisation of strike action by the workers at Shannon more dif-

icult to organise. This was and remains an important argument. After all there’s probably no argument with the fact that the single most effective form of direct action protest is workers – through their unions – refusing to re-fuel planes in Shannon or refusing to build Shell’s terminal. Or, in the case of another anti-war action in Ireland – refusing to co-operate with Raytheon’s pro-war work in Derry.

Across Europe there have at various times been such actions. But in Ireland we have never got past ritualistic calls for strike action. The challenge that faces us is to turn the tide of public opinion to one supportive of such action. If we are asking workers in Shannon, for example, to refuse to handle planes carrying US troops we are asking them to put their jobs and their livelihoods on the line. How can we create a public climate which will rally round and support such workers? How can we even create the climate where their unions – who despite their stated position of opposition to the war do little or nothing to implement this policy – will support them in such an action?

One thing is certain. Direct actions such as the March ’03 attempt to pull down the fence at Shannon or the August ’06 occupation of the Raytheon plant cannot harm attempts to organise workers’ action. As the Workers Solidarity article referred to above (from WS 75) put it :“Aren’t Workers strikes are the best form of direct action?” True again, and while we should do our bit to encourage and support them there’s no reason to wait for them to do it. They mightn’t be agreeable to the anti-war case or they mightn’t have the confidence to risk going on strike. If we’re going to call for them to take a risk we should at least be prepared to take a few ourselves. Workers’ strikes and breaching security are not mutually exclusive tactics.”

This is the challenge in the context of anti-war activity and in the Shell context in Mayo. Can we continue to (or in Shannon’s case re-start) build direct action protests with mass participation, and at the same time work through our unions and community organisations to create the political climate in which workers will feel able to take the most effective form of direct action – strike action.



Bin Tax Direct Action, Pic by Paula Geraghty



# The Grassroots Gatherings

*Networking a “movement of movements”*

The worldwide “movement of movements”, which has brought together individual movements fighting neo-liberal capitalism and the “New World Order” since the late 1990s, is a strange kind of animal. Some might say it is less of a single species and more of a symbiotic relationship between several species, or even a mini-ecosystem making its way through the cracks of the world the powerful created.

Metaphors aside, the “movement of movements” consists of several very different kinds of things. It includes a multitude of local campaigns, sometimes organised into large-scale movements around specific issues (opposition to the “war on terror”, fighting resource extraction companies, workplace organising, struggles over women’s rights over their own bodies, movements of peasants and small farmers, intellectual property campaigns, opposition to racism... the list goes on and on).

It includes the high-profile summit protests where the ritual meetings of our rulers are disrupted by direct action, delegitimated by mass demonstrations, critiqued in counter-summits and forced to hide in remote rural areas, dictatorships where protests are banned, behind massive walls or shielded by armies and surface-to-air missiles. And it includes the long, slow process of creating continuity between summit protests, networking between different movements and campaigns, building trust or at least cooperation between different political (and anti-political) traditions: learning to have confidence in ourselves across a whole society or a whole world. The Grassroots Gatherings, which have been running in Ireland for the last five years, fit in here: a space to meet each other and learn to work together; a place to dance, learn juggling, fall in love and practice for street fighting; a place to work on the issues that divide us and identify what we have in common; a very temporary autonomous zone where the phrase “another world is under construction” is more than just a neat slogan.

From one point of view, part of the job of activists is to build links between individual discontent into local campaigns, to tie together local campaigns into movements around single issues, and to find the common threads shared across those movements. This is where we fight back against the isolation and particularism that capitalism, racism and patriarchy impose on us, and where we start to create possibilities that go beyond changing little

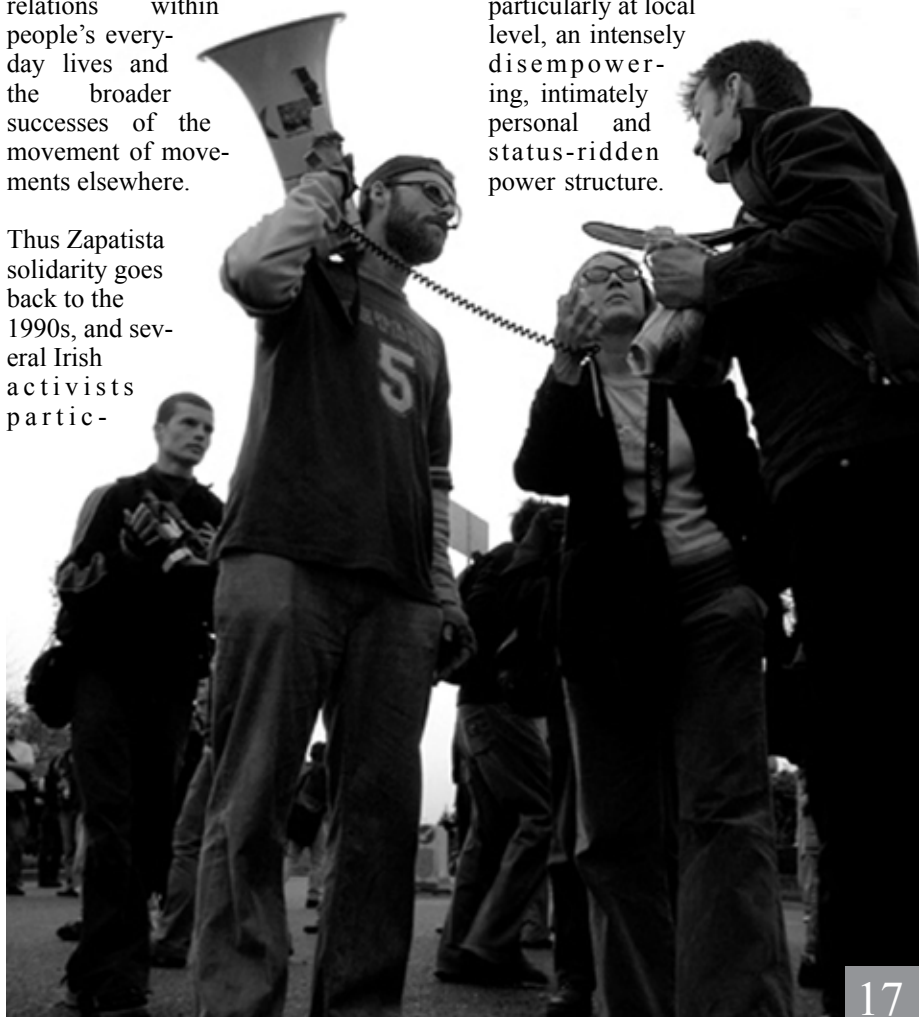
things within a big picture that remains the same. Although activists are always doing this, there are times when people are on the defensive in their own lives and the big structures of oppression and exploitation are on the advance, and in these times our efforts to connect are houses built on sand, constantly undermined by the tide of money and power. In other times, such as the last ten years, our own limited efforts connect with the much broader movement of other people’s everyday struggles to change their lives; activists learn from these as well as helping give them shape, and the process feels as though it may be able to change something larger, beyond our own comfort zones.

The movement of movements in Ireland draws on long-standing struggles: community opposition to multinationals, the women’s movement, left and trade union battles, working-class community organising, the counterculture and a huge range of anti-racist, solidarity and self-organised immigrant groups. It also draws on a long history of networking between movements. Its ability to take these processes further depends both on shifting power relations within people’s everyday lives and the broader successes of the movement of movements elsewhere.

Thus Zapatista solidarity goes back to the 1990s, and several Irish activists partic-

ipated in the two Zapatista-sponsored Encuentros which encouraged networking processes around the world. Irish activists took part in the 2000 World Bank / IMF protests in Prague and the 2001 G8 protests in Genoa, and various events were organised in Ireland around these. Since 2001 Irish involvement in opposing the US administration’s “long war” has grown and shrunk in tandem with the movement elsewhere.

Specific features of the Irish situation include the “Celtic Tiger” and, more broadly, the widespread social change from a post-colonial, semi-peripheral situation in the 1980s to becoming “part of Europe” in terms of salaries (and racism), consumption patterns (and individualism), declining religious power (and the defeat of some elements of old-style patriarchy). Many of those whose hopes for social change did not distinguish between the liberal and radical agendas had to discover for themselves that to become “like other countries” was not enough to bring about equality or justice. Others had to gain the resources and confidence to come out from under the thumb of what had often been, particularly at local level, an intensely disempowering, intimately personal and status-ridden power structure.



New kinds of struggles developed – opposing incinerators or bin taxes, reclaiming the streets or opposing new roads projects – and new kinds of alliances were forged.

In this context, a number of activists – on the suggestion of Irish anarchists – took the initiative of calling a meeting for those involved in the movement from bottom-up points of view. The goal was to “keep campaigns open and decentralised, [get] a radical message across [and avoid] the co-optation, fragmentation and professionalisation of activism”. The invitation defined “bottom-up” as broadly as possible (“grassroots, libertarian, anarchist, participatory, anti-authoritarian”) so as to include community activists, feminists, ecological activists and radical democrats. Those writing and endorsing the letter were mainly anarchists (WSM, ASF, Alliance of Cork anarchists), environmentalists (Gluaiseacht, Free the Old Head of Kinsale, Sustainable Ireland), solidarity activists (Irish Mexico group), community organisers, alternative media (Indymedia, Cyberjournal, The Path, Blue, Rebelweb, A-Infos) and individuals involved in abortion rights, anti-racist work and trade unions. They were based in Dublin, Belfast, Cork, Derry, Limerick, Kildare, Monaghan, Wexford, Down, England and Rome.

At the time the goal was stated as the development of a separate grassroots strand within the movement which would nevertheless be able to cooperate with other strands (NGOs, authoritarian left groups etc.) when appropriate. In practice, the Grassroots Gatherings – and groups linked to them – have become the main (and the only continuous) networking of the “movement of movements” in Ireland. Other attempts have been made (the broader-based Irish Social Forum, the SWP-dominated Global Resistance and Irish Anti-War Movement, some NGO-led conferences) but none has had a continuous and active presence, unlike other countries where these strands are often the dominant ones within the movement.

To date 10 gatherings have been held between 2001 and 2005. In keeping with the goal of autonomy and decentralisation, there has been no central committee; at the end of each gathering a group of activists has offered to host the next one in their own area (the Gatherings are currently stalled because no offer was made at the end of the 10th), and has got on with organising it in their own way, around an agenda set by themselves and with sometimes very different structures and themes.

This means that - rather than the same people being involved

### Grassroots Gatherings to date

- 1) Dublin (Teachers' Club and Spacecraft), November 2001. “Global and local: a grassroots gathering”.
- 2) Cork (Cork Autonomous Zone), March 2002. “Taking back control of our lives”.
- 3) Belfast (Giros), October 2002. (no title)
- 4) Limerick (Locus), March 2003. “Community, environmental and global justice activism”.
- 5) Dublin (Teachers' Club), June 2003. (no title)
- 6) Galway (UCG), November 2003. (no title)
- 7) Cork (Mayfield retreat centre), March 2004. (no title)
- 8) Belfast (QUB and around), October 2004. “Building safe communities, addressing gender bias and racism”.
- 9) Dublin (St Nicholas of Myra community hall), April 2005. “The death of partnership / what now for grassroots activism?”
- 10) Erris (Rosspoint Solidarity Camp), August 2005. “Local community campaigns”

in organising every Gathering, or being frowned on if they were unable to do so – the organising teams have been constantly shifting, as has participation at the Gatherings. Not only has this not been a practical problem (indicating the power of bottom-up organising strategies and the growing capacities of activists around the country), but the usual guilt-tripping over participation, and the identification of projects with individuals, seems not to have happened (which means that we are starting to get out of the emotional space of old-style Irish organising). It's a small example, but against the backdrop of traditional activism in Ireland a telling one.

The general framework of Gatherings has been as a series of discussions; sometimes organised along the style familiar from international anti-capitalist events (opening plenary and introductions, multiple parallel workshops, closing plenary), sometimes in other ways (discussion sessions where speakers were limited to 5-minute introductions; “Open Space” methodology; practical planning sessions). Around the edges literature has been distributed, mailing lists set up, contacts made, actions organised and new events planned. Much of the “real work”, though, has taken place outside of this structure, in the practicalities of setting up, cooking and cleaning together; childcare and events for children; evening socials; sleeping on other people's floors; sharing buses or lifts; and coming to recognise each other – beyond theoretical principles and the details of our campaigns – as intelligent, competent, independent activists not too different from ourselves. Participation has varied from about 50 people to about 300, depending on location more than anything else. Of these, at least three quarters at any Gathering I have attended have been activists, people already significantly involved in different campaigns or organi-

sations; while there have been a scattering of people who enjoy gatherings for their own sake, people trying to find a way into activism and overseas visitors, the Gatherings have always been mainly about networking between activists, and numbers need to be assessed in these terms.

This has fed directly in to one of the main goals of the Gatherings, which has been to build alliances by meeting each other outside the pressured situations of organising committees, public meetings and street actions. At the start of the Gatherings, Irish anarchists were already working well together despite theoretical and organisational differences, and links were growing with radical environmentalists around campaigns such as the Glen of the Downs and Reclaim the Streets.

Almost from the foundation, strong connections were made with alternative media (particularly Indymedia), international solidarity (particularly with Latin America), the anti-war movement (particularly its direct action wing). In other areas (the women's movement, anti-racist and immigrant groups, trade union activism, working-class community organising), while the links are real, they are also relatively small, and the bulk of these movements remains separate from the kinds of alliance represented by the Gatherings. This situation is familiar from the movement of movements in other parts of the English-speaking world in particular and sets it off from that in other parts of Europe (such as France or Italy, where trade unions and immigrant groups have been central parts of the movement), as well as from the rest of the world (such as Latin America or India, where women's groups and community organising are far more central to the movement).

A second goal, represented by the princi-

ples of the Gatherings, has been to develop a specifically bottom-up wing within the movement of movements, defined in ways which can include anarchists, ecologists, feminists, libertarian Marxists, community activists and radical democrats. Probably the details are not too important (to the best of my knowledge the only debate around these has been during the formation of Grassroots Dissent in 2005), but to the extent that they represent a way of working which enables cooperation across our different organisational styles and traditions, they seem mostly to work.

The main criticisms have been around informal realities: domination by older, more articulate activists and masculine operating styles which disempower women. We should not ignore, though, the “voting with your feet” represented by the fact that people from trade union, community, women’s and immigrant / ethnic minority groups (as well as activists in their forties and beyond) rarely come to the Gatherings except as invited speakers or as members of other movements which are present. This may reflect a criticism of organising styles, a sense that the Gatherings are not relevant to their movements, practical issues such as time, travel etc. or a mixture of all three.

The call for the first Grassroots Gathering in 2001 set out a list of principles which have become accepted as a basis for the Gatherings. The basic points are these:

*People should control their own lives and work together as equals, as part of how we work as well as what we are working towards. Within the network this means rejecting top-down and state-centred forms of organisation (hierarchical, authoritarian, expert-based, Leninist etc.) The network should be open, decentralised and re-ally democratic.*

*We call for solutions that involve ordinary people controlling their own lives and having the resources to do so:*

- *The abolition, not reform, of global bodies like the World Bank and WTO, and a challenge to underlying structures of power and inequality;*
- *The control of the workplace by those who work there;*
- *The control of communities by people who live there; We argue for a sustainable environmental, economic and social system, agreed by the people of the planet. We aim to work together in ways which are accessible to everyone, particularly women and working-class people, rather than reproducing feelings of disempowerment and alienation within our own network.*

*“We call for solutions that involve ordinary people controlling their own lives and having the resources to do so”*

The third, and most important, goal has been to contribute to the development of the movement of movements in Ireland by feeding into the development of local campaigns and movements as well as direct confrontations with the state. Other than direct organisational links (see next section), it’s obviously hard to name which developments can be specifically traced to the Gatherings and which have to do with events in the wider society, the impact of the global movement or the work of other activists and organisations.

What can confidently be said is that the Gatherings have been a significant part of the rise of the movement of movements in Ireland, from a situation where the most that happened locally was events in solidarity with protests and movements elsewhere to the point where the big power structures have been confronted massively – around the cancelled WEF meeting in 2003, the EU summit and Bush visit in 2004; radical, direct action-oriented campaigns with a democratic orientation have grown - around the military use of Shannon airport, the Shell/Statoil project at Rosspoint, other big projects at Tara, Ringaskiddy and elsewhere; and a host of local campaigns and projects have developed, so that (at least in my own town of Dublin) it has at times taken a monthly meeting just to update each other on everything that is going on in terms of bottom-up organising (from StreetSeen to community gardening, from the anarcho-feminist RAG to anti-racist actions).

Some specific offshoots of “Grassroots” can be identified, where activists have used the Gatherings to develop new campaigns and networks that have taken on a life of their own. Briefly, these include the Grassroots Network Against War, that organised mass direct actions at Shannon airport; a variety of local Grassroots groups (in Dublin, Cork, Belfast and Galway at least); and (in Dublin) the development of Grassroots Dissent and the monthly “Anti-Authoritarian Assemblies” mentioned above from the merger of Dub-

lin Grassroots Network, which organised the Mayday 2004 summit protests, and the Dissent! Group, which organised participation in the Gleneagles 2005 G8 protest. Beyond this, “Grassroots” has come to stand – sometimes positively, sometimes negatively – for a new style of organising in Irish activism: committed to direct action for radical goals, oriented to bottom-up democracy, and connecting activists across all our diversity rather than trying to force everyone to follow a single “line”. Gatherings have been important organising sites for people trying to develop direct action in particular campaigns, building support networks (eg prisoner support, legal action, alternative media), and creating new projects (eg community gardening, squats / social centres).

Although the purpose of the Grassroots Gatherings have been explicitly focussed on discussion, naturally the prospect of imminent action enlivens things wonderfully, and is one area where specific contributions can be named. The June 2003 Dublin Gathering set out to make a bridge between the energy then flying around anti-war activism and the planned WEF regional meeting in Dublin that autumn. That meeting was subsequently cancelled; initially the government cited security reasons but then (perhaps realising that it was not a good idea to tell people that activism could have effects) came up with various other explanations (a report for the meeting was said not to be ready). Given the political capital invested by individuals such as Peter Sutherland and Mary Harney to bring the WEF to Dublin, it seems unlikely that a consultant’s missed deadline would cancel such an expensive meeting. Far more likely is that the 2003 Gathering (said at the time to be the largest libertarian gathering ever held in Ireland) and the more or less simultaneous Irish Social Forum showed sufficient opposition to the WEF that holding it in Dublin Castle as planned would have been a very risky strategy.

A source of particular joy at this meeting was that the SWP were holding a meeting in the basement of the Teachers’ Club while the Gathering was happening on the floors above. In keeping with the critique of “vampiric” activism, sucking the life out of campaigns for organisational purposes and then moving on, a large poster of Buffy the Vampire Slayer was posted on the stairs to protect the Gathering... The energy developed around planning opposition to the WEF was still available the following year for the formation of Dublin Grassroots Network, which organised a “weekend for an alternative Europe” in opposition to the May EU summit and its

politics of Fortress Europe, neo-liberal economics and global warfare. This has been covered extensively by Dec McCarthy in a recent RBR.

In the aftermath of the Mayday protests, DGN and the Gatherings were shaken when one activist was accused of raping another. This brought up issues of personal safety and gender dynamics within the movement, questions of how to deal with internal violence from a grassroots point of view, and a range of power issues as various processes were improvised to tackle the case. Partly as a response to this, the 8th Grassroots Gathering in Belfast was dedicated to issues of gender and race, and at this and the 9th Gathering in Dublin feminists organised their own, massively-attended workshops around issues such as safe space policies.

Most recently, the 10th Grassroots Gathering was held at Rosspoint Solidarity Camp last year as a way of building support for the campaign and linking rural community-based struggles. In many ways this is exactly what bottom-up gatherings should be for: a tool that local activists can use for their own purposes, rather than a travelling circus or an organisation parachuting into a local area.

The rape case threw up in a very vivid form some of the informal problems which activists in the Gatherings had been aware of without being able to tackle. These can be summarised firstly in terms of participation (relatively few participants from traditional working-class backgrounds or from ethnic minorities, few participants over forty or under twenty, significantly more men than women). Secondly, in terms of internal culture and operating style, there are definite conflicts between the different ways of being that people bring from their own life experience and political practice (more macho cultures of direct action versus softer, less confrontational approaches; more wordy and competitive orientations versus more hands-on and cooperative orientations; a tendency to assume that everyone shares a common history and points of reference versus attempts to be clearer about one's own background and starting point). Thirdly, in terms of political movements, some of Ireland's largest progressive movements (community organising, the women's movement, trade unionism and the self-organisation of ethnic minorities) have relatively little presence at the Gatherings.

Obviously this can be interpreted in different ways, leading to different political conclusions. One is to look at our own internal practice and try to challenge conventional



ways of working, to hold “a revolution within the revolution” as the 8th and 9th Gatherings to some extent attempted to do. Another is to see the problem as lying within the broader society and the constraints to political participation faced by women, working-class people and ethnic minorities, leading to underrepresentation and a focus on the most immediately pressing issues; while there is no doubt some truth in this, it says little about what can be done to change things. Alternatively, we can ask questions about the different political focus of these movements (the emphasis placed on working with the state and elites, the role of professional organisers and academics, the fear of disruptive action) and ask in a more focussed way what elements within these movements may be interested in working with bottom-up, direct action-oriented groups trying to build a “movement of movements” – something which has been pursued to some extent in the selection of topics and speakers. This has been attempted particularly in relation to community-based movements, in the preparation of the 5th, 9th and 10th Gatherings.

Here generational questions seem particularly important, as the political experience of dominant groups within each movement (eg feminist academics schooled in the campaigns of the 1980s; community activists who have been through the professionalisation of the 1990s; ethnic minority organisers who are still constructing their own organisations and finding their feet within Irish politics) mean that we are often looking to speak to minority wings within these movements, who are (still) willing to break the law, who are (still) willing to step outside their own organisational comfort zones, who are willing to explore what for most Irish activists are relatively new ways of organising, and who are interested in being part of the “movement of movements” in ways that go beyond attending conferences or passing motions of support.

For the moment, however, the internal changes of political culture seem easier to affect than broadening the network to include relatively self-confident movements, which in turn seem easier to affect than the broad inequalities of power and resources in Irish society. However, the current pause in Gatherings, and the re-organising of the broader “movement of movements” that is underway in Ireland, should give us the chance to think about how we can tackle all three constructively.

By comparison with these political issues, the (other) practical issues faced by the Gatherings are relatively minor. Probably the biggest one is whether the Gatherings should continue to be a network of existing campaigns or whether, as the movement develops, they should increasingly take on a role as point of first contact, with a focus on education and information – something which would probably reduce the degree of democratic organisation in favour of top-down presentations. However, new activists have to start somewhere, and as the movement of movements grows internationally, it can be easier for people to see the whole picture and then try to find somewhere they can make a difference rather than start from a local campaign and then find their way forward to broader and broader networks.

A second question is geographical. Realistically, only a handful of towns (without naming names!) have continuous libertarian scenes which are able to organise Gatherings – at present, no-one seems to feel able to do so (in some cases because of the pressure of other issues, in some cases because of organisational crisis). At times Grassroots activists have discussed deliberately using Gatherings as a way to help local scenes develop, but so far no such Gatherings – which would logically happen in small towns or extended sub-

urban areas – have happened. Does this mean that libertarian organising will remain a matter of well-connected urban scenes and small networks of individuals elsewhere? Or do Gatherings have a responsibility to help capacity-building and skill-sharing? In Dublin, it seems that the recent anti-authoritarian assemblies and the associated GrassrootsDissent mailing list have to some extent filled the networking place that Gatherings used to fulfil. Something like this might happen elsewhere (Cork? Belfast?) in the future, but will hardly be able to happen even in other cities let alone elsewhere. The geographical issue needs to be taken seriously, however it is answered. A third issue, which to date has been largely fudged, has been that of how decisions are made. This includes the opposition between consensus and voting systems; the extent to which Gatherings are planned in advance by a local team around a theme, left completely open (as with “Open Space” technology) or cobbled together out of whatever workshops people happen to offer. To date, the Gatherings’ focus on discussion rather than decision-making has saved us from total disaster in this area, but these issues have brought up very strong emotions on all sides.

Despite these weaknesses, the Grassroots Gatherings can claim significant achievements, many of which have already been indicated. The Gatherings, and other associated “Grassroots” organisations, are the only network within the movement of movements in Ireland which has had anything like a continuous life, and have contributed significantly to the broader movement (in large-scale protests against the WEF, EU, Bush and G8 as well as in specific struggles at Shannon, Rossport and elsewhere). This contribution has come from sharing skills across movements, identifying common issues which enable cooperation, and glimpsing broader possibilities for social change; it has also come from developing trust among ourselves and supporting the development of local activist capacities (not least through the organisation of a Gathering: it is no small undertaking to host two or three hundred people for an event with several dozen workshops and organise food, accommodation and socials).

## “New activists have to start somewhere, and as the movement of movements grows internationally,”

Perhaps most importantly, they make visible the “other world” that has been so much talked about in recent years: in the everyday struggles that ordinary people like us engage in to change their situation, in critiques of the official wisdom provided by experts, in our own capacity to organise ourselves and have an effect on the world, in our ability to work together with people who we are supposed to be cut off from by different interests, styles of consumption, ways of being in the world and political traditions. That other world is colourful, problematic, creative, emotional, intelligent, conflict-ridden, interactive and vividly alive in our Gatherings.

This article is of course in part a call to local groups to host another Gathering, and an argument for their continued value. There is a fair amount of work involved in this, but the benefits for a local group, particularly one which is not currently involved in a massive campaign, are significant in terms of revitalising activism, bringing in new people, making links and developing capacity. Another call that needs to be made is for a revival of the Gatherings’ internet presence, which has largely lapsed. A handful of people made an effort last year to gather all the different Gathering websites; the site they built suffered from technical problems and has since disappeared, so that our shared experiences over the last five years are now only recoverable through Google and often overlaid by dating ads

Similarly, the grassroots-network mailing list has largely lapsed, and these days mostly consists of cross-postings from the GrassrootsDissent list. The general pause in holding Gatherings does almost certainly reflect the broader questions about

their purpose, achievements and limitations, and what role they should have in the future. My own feeling is that they should act as a point of contact between all the different bottom-up struggles happening nationally (which perhaps means meeting less frequently than before, given how much is happening), that they should consciously aim to extend the network beyond its current limitations (and approach activists in the women’s movement, trade unions, minority groups and community organising not simply as speakers but to ask how we could do this or to organise joint events), and that they should remain primarily an activist-to-activist event, which is ultimately a better way of introducing people to bottom-up activism than organising specifically “educational” events targeted at people who supposedly know nothing.

The greatest strength of the Gatherings is in the diversity of the movements they bring together; this is always a fragile alliance, dependent on better-organised groups refraining from pushing through their own ways of doing things and pushing others out, and on less well-organised groups pushing to have their voices heard, to make alliances and to create their own space within the broader network rather than retreating to somewhere safer. What was initially an uncertain experiment has become “just how things are”, and we are at risk of taking this achievement for granted and ignoring it or getting on with other things. But if we do this, we also accept that this is as much as we can hope to do together, and abandon the bigger space – of who shapes the world – to the forces of capitalist globalisation, patriarchy, “the long war” and racism to define. The real question is to think beyond what has seemed possible up to now, and to ask what more the movement of movements in Ireland can become.

- Laurence Cox

*Laurence Cox was a signatory of the original invitation to the Gatherings and has been involved in organising three of them.*





# Sex Workers

## Interview with Ana Lopez

**WSM: Can you please introduce yourself and the union you are part of and helped start.**

*Ana:* My name is Ana Lopez from the International Union of Sex Workers (IUSW). I was one of the founders of IUSW. I was working as a sex worker in London when I finished my masters and wanted to start a PhD. Since I was working in this area, I decided that I would do research for my PhD within the sex industry. I don't believe in science for science sake, I believe that any kind of research should be engaged and useful for the people you have studied. I started doing what we call strategic research, where you ask the people you want to study what they think is an interesting topic or area that needs to be studied and what kind of information they need to gather to respond to those needs.

I did my pilot interview with people from different sectors of the sex industry: from prostitution, street workers, pornography models and actors. And I asked them these kinds of questions. What I found out from this initial group of people was that one of the main complaints was that they felt very isolated and they didn't have a collective voice. They were telling me they needed a collective voice in order to eliminate the exploitation that they faced. This group of people didn't feel that their work was inherently bad or immoral in any sense, but they felt that they were forced to work in exploitative conditions because of the legislation and because of the stigma attached to their work.

They also wanted to respond to the way the media portrayed them. The general public only has the media to understand what sex work is all about and they show a very black and white picture that doesn't do justice to the realities and multiple experiences within sex work.

When I heard all of this I interpreted it from my activ-

ist background that they weren't giving me a topic of research but a call for action. And I thought that I had the responsibility to have this action happen with their help. So I called my pilot interviewees for a meeting in my flat over tea and cookies and we talked about this kind of research. I asked them if they were really serious about this and if they would like to create this type of platform and collective in which we can demand our rights.

When it was clear that this was what people wanted, we then defined our mission statement and what we were there for. We decided that we were there to fight for rights for all types of sex workers, especially labour rights. We felt that what was wrong with the way people saw sex workers till then was that it was discussed within the realm of feminism, gender and morality. What we were saying was that it was work, and the reason all of us are in this industry is that we need to pay our bills at the end of each month. So if we treat it as any other work, as a labour issue, then we can find solutions. And solutions are to be found in eliminating the exploitative conditions and not eliminating the industry altogether. That what you do in other exploitative industries also applies here. Women and transgender people get exploited in many other industries unfortunately. But the response of the feminist and trade union movement in relation to those other industries is to eliminate the exploitation and not the industry itself. We wanted to get in line with all other workers. Basically that's how it got started.

**WSM: How have you gone about getting members in to the union, outside of your personal network?**

*Ana:* At the beginning we started by publishing a magazine, we called it RESPECT! (Rights and Equality for Sex Professionals and Employees in Connected Trades). This magazine has articles written about sex work and by sex workers. We were able to go to different places where sex workers operate, we had some-

thing to offer and something to talk about. We also set up a web site and a discussion list. These two things were instrumental in making this group international. When we started we called ourselves international, but we started as a small group based in London so we were not international. Through the web site people have joined from all over the world, we have more than 2000 members on the discussion list.

**WSM: Would you have members from all different aspects of sex work?**

Ana: The two most dominant groups are people who work in prostitution (I mean all types of prostitution; people who work on the streets, people who work indoors, people who work in S&M, escorts) and people who work in dance - strip tease, pole dancing etc. Those are the biggest groups, but we also have models, actresses and phone sex operators.

**WSM: In terms of the work that is legal at the moment, what are the rights you are fighting for?**

Ana: The right to have a proper contract, having a proper code of conduct in the place you work so it is clear what you are allowed and not allowed to do, for the managers and clients to know what they are allowed and not allowed to do. It is important that these are written down and made very clear, and if someone breaks those rules there must be mechanisms to address that and penalise the one who broke the rules. So it's very important to have grievance procedures like most other work places. Now there are a couple of clubs that are unionised and you can find these things.

Also Health and Safety rights, something that is basic in most other work places that is ignored in the sex industry. People are using their bodies in their work, they are dancing and wearing high heels. For instance, you can't expect dancers who are wearing high heels to be going up and down stairs, it is not safe at all. You cannot expect them to dance doing floor work if the floor is not clean. And you can't use abrasive cleaning products to clean poles because people are going to use those poles to lean against.

**WSM: How about the illegal aspects of sex work, what is the union trying to fight for there?**

Ana: We are calling for the decriminalisation of sex work, prostitution specifically, since all the establishments in that area are illegal. Prostitution itself is legal but everything around it is illegal. There

**“Prostitution itself is legal but everything around it is illegal. There is hardly any way you can do this as a profession and without breaking the law somehow”**

is hardly any way you can do this as a profession and without breaking the law somehow. That is what makes it such a dangerous and underground activity. We are using the political clout of the union to put pressure on governments to decriminalise prostitution.

**WSM: Would the goal be to eliminate street prostitution and have safe legal indoor spaces?**

Ana: No, that is something that the general public thinks would be a good idea, and unfortunately politicians as well, but that wouldn't be a fair type of situation. That kind of idea comes from people thinking that no one would work on the streets if they had the choice. That's not true, many people would prefer to work on the streets because there is freedom attached to that; you are independent, you don't have a boss, you decide what type of hours you want to work.

For many people that is very important. What we would call for is legal establishments so that people can work in those establishments legally. In that situation you would have less people working on the streets. And for those who choose to work on the streets, the idea is that they can work in safety, in safety zones. It might not be the ideal but there are examples where it is working really well in the Netherlands and in Edinburgh, so that is the model we have been pointing to. These areas are appointed by the local authorities as areas that prostitution takes place in and police will be there to protect the sex workers rather than arrest them. These areas would be well lit so there are less chances of being attacked by potentially dangerous or violent clients.

**WSM: On your web site you say that the percentage of women who experience trafficking is quite low, yet in the media it would seem that this is a huge problem, can you speak about that?**

Ana: This is an industry where lots and

lots of people want to migrate. Sex workers are often the most entrepreneurial people within their company. In this industry there is always a need for new faces, so to be a successful sex worker you have to move from one place to another. If you want to earn money you are going to move to another country where someone told you where you can make more money. People often just want to move for the sake of moving.

So there is a lot of migration, very often people do not have the opportunity to migrate in a legal way so they will need a third party helping them in this process of migration. Because it is an illegal industry, an illegal process of migration, this leaves many opportunities for these third parties to exploit sex workers. In migration it's a process you can compare to a lottery; some people are very lucky and they make a lot of money in the country they migrated to. Some people have very bad stories to tell. There is a continuum of situations. In one extreme you have people who have been successful and in the other extreme you have people who have experienced exploitative situations, such as slavery.

We cannot let this happen, even if it's one person it's not acceptable. There is a sense that the media makes this into hype, a moral fear. You would have the impression that all migration is trafficking and it's not. Those situations with exploitation and where people have no freedom of movement are in a tiny minority if you compare it to the phenomenon that is migration. To look at this you have to look at migration first.

**WSM: On the web site, in debunking myths about prostitution and showing the positive role prostitutes have in society, you talk about the prostitute's role with people with physical and other disabilities that for whatever reason can't masturbate themselves and/or are unable to have sexual relationships with other people. It would seem that that aspect of a sex worker's clientele would be quite small and it would be more the rich white businessmen who are using the service and maintaining the power and hierarchical dynamics in the rest of the society. Can you speak on this?**

Ana: Possibly they are not such a small minority as you imagine. I know many sex workers that make most of their money with the city workers and businessmen so they can have time to dedicate to clients who have disabilities so

they don't need to charge as much. These are areas that are growing.

There is a demand for whatever reason for sexual services. I believe the market is growing because until recently the only people who had economic power to use sexual services were businessmen, male, with high economic status. I think things are changing and more and more women have economic power to access sexual services. There is still a lot of stigma attached to that. I think when women are accessing sex workers it's through the internet so they are not seen as using these services.

I don't see much of a division between the entertainment industry and the sex industry. In my grandmother's time if you chose to be a theatre actress it was as good as being a sex worker. You would be labelled as a whore and a slut and you wouldn't have a high status in society at all. And this has changed tremendously, now singers and actresses have very high status.

**WSM: It seems like prostitution is not like every other type of work. It is many women's experience to be treated like they are prostitutes, that they get treated as an object to be used and that they are expected to use their body to repay a favour that a male has done for them. And women get treated like prostitutes every day with out having made the choice to go into that profession.**

*Ana:* Thank you for asking this question, it is one that no one has asked me in a long time and it is the reason for my activism. No woman is free till all sex workers are free. It is exactly that stigma, that we can call the whore stigma, that is not limited to sex workers. We sex workers feel that every woman on the planet at a certain point feels that stigma, since it is attached to

**“Because we work with our bodies it is obvious that no one should control our bodies, and that we should be able to do what ever we want with our own bodies”**

all women. So that's why I think that all women should join in solidarity to fight for our rights. Because at any point you can be called a whore, if there is no reason for that to be a stigma then we all can be free. That will stop being an insult when sex workers are treated with dignity like any other worker and when no sex worker is in this industry against their will. And that is the role of the union and sex worker self organisation, to make sure that no one is in this industry against their will and those that are in the industry can work with full labour rights with dignity and respect. I think sex workers organising should be inspiring for other workers.

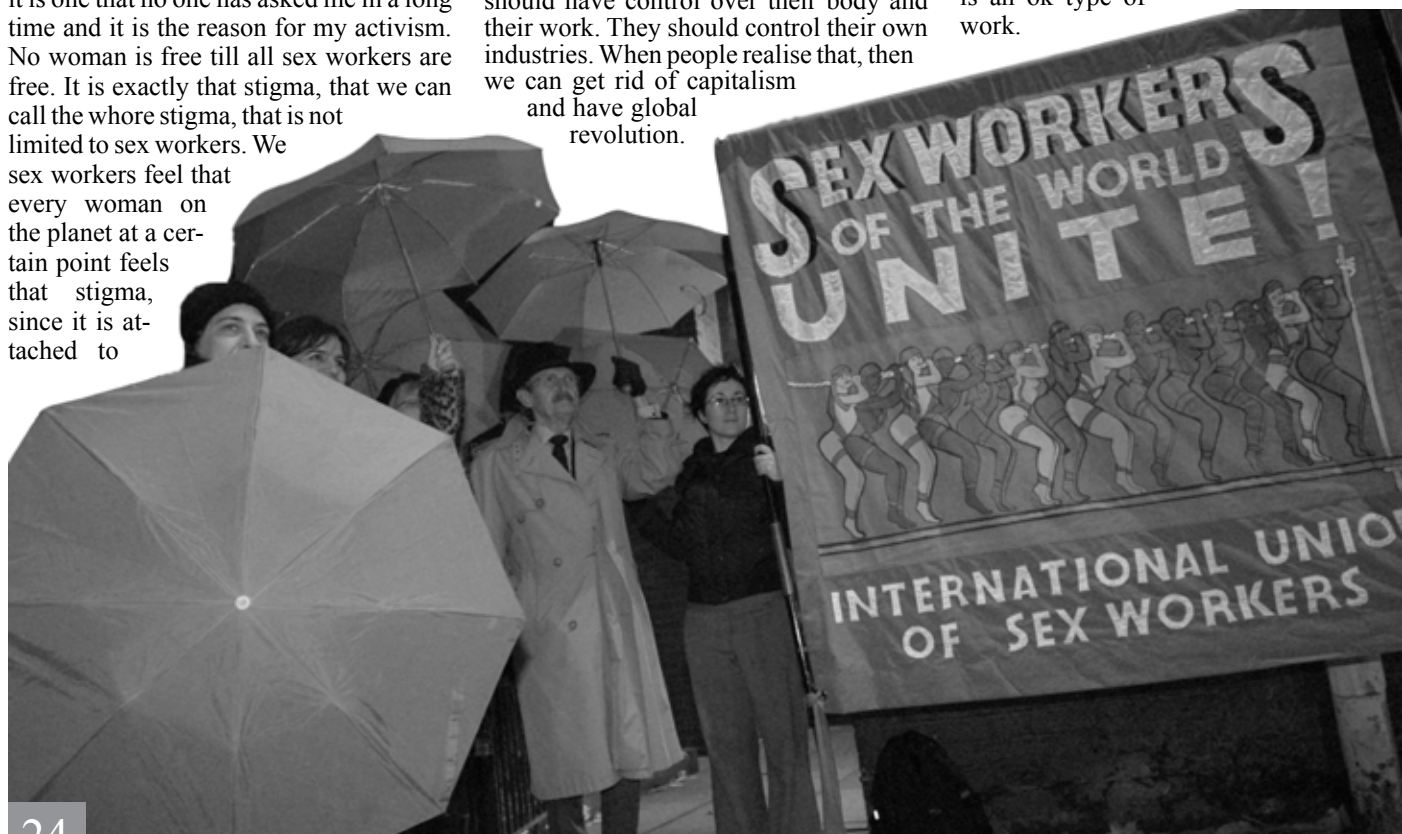
Because we work with our bodies it is obvious that no one should control our bodies, and that we should be able to do what ever we want with our own bodies. And if we manage to organise and do our work on our own terms, and have control of our industry in the least organised and the most marginalised of workers, then any worker can do that, and I hope this inspires other workers to see that no one should have control over their body and their work. They should control their own industries. When people realise that, then we can get rid of capitalism and have global revolution.

**WSM: You mentioned in your talk that the people that were part of your pilot interview all made an informed decision to work in the sex industry, do you think this represents the wider community?**

*Ana:* They were a network of friends many of whom were involved in other forms of activism as well, so I would not generalise this across all those in the industry. Yet I can say after five years of activism and working in the industry and so on that that it is a great majority. It is only a small minority that doesn't make an informed decision to enter this industry.

**WSM: From many women I know, they have said they consider going to into sex work at some level, let it be phone work and so on due to feeling extreme poverty. And other women have said that in the back of their minds they knew it was always an option because they were a woman. I would not consider these situations to be informed decisions, but rather desperation.**

*Ana:* Yet that applies to any other industry. I wouldn't consider working in McDonalds because at this time I'm not desperate. Let's say this year or the year after I'm really desperate for money, maybe I would work at McDonalds or clean toilets, things that I would never imagine myself doing. Things that I think are more undignified and humiliating than working in the sex industry. People have different images of what they want to do, and different ideas of what is humiliating and what is an ok type of work.





I think that poverty is not enough to explain sex work because on one hand you have people in poverty who do not work in the sex industry, who choose to do other things, and many people who do work in the sex industry who are not in poverty and have many other possibilities. I know many people in the industry who have degrees who have left other careers to work in the sex industry and so on. What you cannot do is generalise in this industry, you have multiple realities. People come from different situations and social and economic backgrounds.

**WSM: You mentioned that part of your struggle is fighting capitalism and I was wondering if in your ideal society capitalism didn't exist and society was self organized, do you think sex work would exist and if so how would it be organised?**

*Ana:* I think that in my ideal utopian society people would not have sex for money, but people would not do teaching for money, they would do everything for love because they wanted to. That is what I'm working for. While we have to live under capitalism, I think it's really unfair to pick on sex workers. We are all selling ourselves, we are all selling our labour under capitalism. So don't pick on sex workers and expect sex workers to do something different from what everyone else is doing.

I think there is a revolutionary potential among sex workers because they are the most oppressed and marginalised of workers, and if this group is able to stand up for their rights and take control of the huge industry it would be an inspiration for all. Because it's underground there is lots of corruption, if we can manage to take control, then any worker can do that. You were asking me a question of sex work being like any type of work and I didn't really address that. I think sex work is a specific type of work, in a sense it is not like any other type of work. There are many other industries that you are using your own body and that doesn't mean you shouldn't have the full range of labour and human rights and that you shouldn't be respected. I'm thinking about an industry that is marginal to the sex industry and that is the fashion industry.

A few years ago when Miss World was held in London, we went to the place where the competition was taking place with banners and leaflets inviting the contestants to join the union, because they also are working with their bodies. They are also working in a corrupt industry. But they have rights, not full rights - that's why we are asking them to join the union. They are still very much exploited, they



**“In supporting this kind of initiative of sex workers organizing, you don't necessarily have to agree with my view that sex work is a legitimate type of work”**

can make lots of money but the ones organising the fashion industry are making much more money. And they experience many of the same problems such as being pushed onto drugs and such things. My point is that they have a different status in society, they are viewed as successful women, young women strive to be like them, and they are all over mainstream magazines. So I ask what is the difference, why can they enjoy respect and a positive view from society and sex workers can't.

When you do sex work you are in danger of getting very emotionally involved, clients are very close to you, your body and so on. There are many professions where this happens. I think if I was a psychiatrist for instance I would not be able to deal with people's emotional problems and switch off at five o'clock in the evening. Yes you have to learn to deal with all this emotional baggage that comes with it. The other thing that is interesting was that I had to tell my mother my work. My mother for many years was a child minder, that was commodification of child care, which in our society is viewed as even more sacred than sex -the mother's love is something that is very sacred. Under capitalism even that is made into a commodity. My mother used to organise five of these women doing this work, their work was to take care of other children

for the day and at the end of the day they go home. And I told my mother you are the equivalent of a brothel mother, you are organising groups of women to do something that in our ideal society would be done for love and not for money. And it is also something that triggers a basic instinct, of motherly love. So these women would love these children for money for a few hours, and then these children would disappear. The biggest difference between my mother and the women that work for her is that they are legal, they are actually seen as doing something good in society's eyes and they have rights and a sex worker doesn't.

In supporting this kind of initiative of sex workers organizing, you don't necessarily have to agree with my view that sex work is a legitimate type of work, and that it's not inherently exploitative. When we were in the union meeting there were different members from different industries, and I tried to pass a motion calling for decriminalising prostitution. Then people got to speak either for or against the motion. And one of the most interesting comments was from this lay member of the GNB who worked in Sellafield, in the nuclear plant. He stood up and said, I work in Sellafield and a lot of people in this room would have a serious problem with what I do and the type of things I produce. But the difference between myself and a sex worker is that I have full labour and human rights, I'm legal and I have health and safety regulations and protective equipment and so on and a sex worker does not have any of that. And I thought that was a really good argument, whatever it is you think about prostitution, whether you think it's morally wrong and so on you should still join in solidarity with this group of workers and support our fight for rights.

# Tales From The Underground

## Review of Ramor Ryan's book - "Clandestines : the Pirate journals of an Irish Exile" - Fergal Finnegan

At this point in time it is a rare and welcome event when a book by an Irish activist is published and rarer still when a book by an Irish anti-capitalist writer receives widespread praise and acclaim. *Clandestines: the Pirate journals of an Irish Exile*, which has received a slew of positive reviews following its publication in the US by AK Press, is just such a rarity, and with its launch in Ireland a number of months ago has received positive appraisal here too.

Although this is Ramor Ryan's first full length book many readers may have already come across Ryan's articles and essays before as the author is relatively well known and his work is included in probably two of the most notable collections of anti-capitalist writing of recent years- the Verso Press publication : "We are Everywhere" and Softskull Press's "Confronting Capitalism".

*".....the only thing that works is memory. Collective memory, but also even the tiniest, most insignificant memory of a personal kind. I suspect, in fact, that one can barely survive without the other; that legend cannot be constructed without anecdote"*

- Paco Ignacio Taibo II

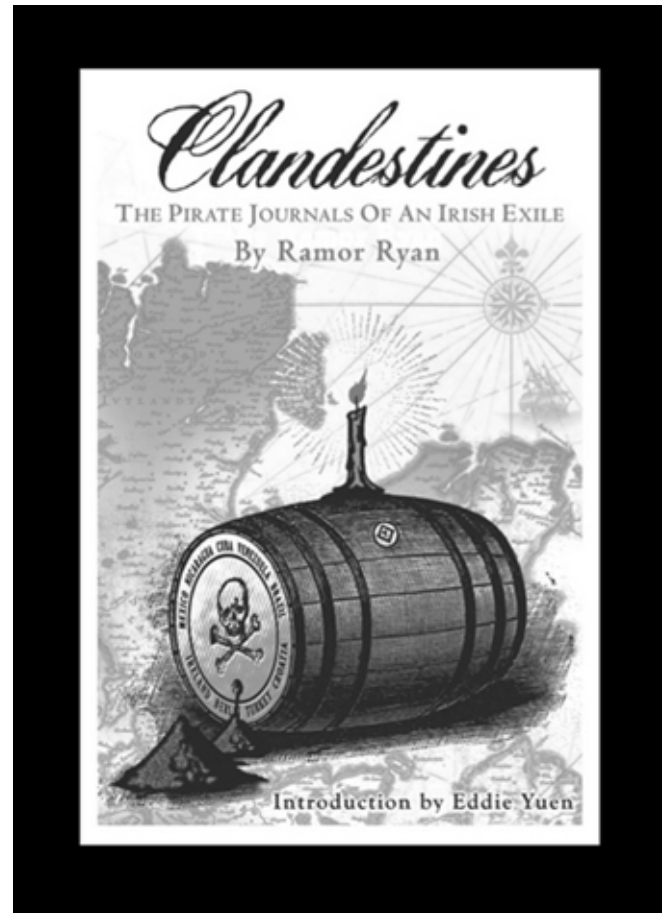
*Clandestines* consists of a series of stories and reflections culled from Ryan's experience of over twenty years of activism. The result is an entertaining and readable mixture of memoir, political essay, travelogue and literature. *Clandestines* then, is not your standard political tract but rather a form of political picaresque documenting Ryan's adventures as a wayward radical with an uncanny ability to find himself in interesting and often tricky situations everywhere from the mountains of Kurdistan to jungles of Chiapas. Ryan has certainly been around the block and the book includes a number of eyewitness accounts of events of major political and historical importance such as the massacre of mourners at

a Republican funeral in Belfast by Michael Stone in 1988 and the electoral defeat of the Sandinistas in 1990.

However, Ryan is at his best when he is observing the everyday and the marginal rather than the epic and grandiose and much of the book is taken up with Ryan's descriptions of various encounters with people at the edges of history. These memorable character sketches, by turns affectionate and exasperated, often ironic and occasionally derisive, fill and enliven the pages of *Clandestines*. Ryan wanders amongst this motley crew-the generous and riotously joyful Berlin squatters, the Zapatista peasants, the disaffected Cubans, a drunk Croatian war veteran, the Central American gang members, a charismatic Venezuelan punk singer, the self indulgent hippies at a Rainbow Gathering and a host of others- observing, conspiring, joking and drinking and ultimately turning these encounters into a series of amusing and interesting tales without ever stretching the reader's credulity too far.

But *Clandestines* is more than a series of anecdotes about the "wretched of the earth" and eccentrics from the activist milieu. In the most impressive sections of the book, like the chapter on life in a dismal Guatemalan backwater, Ryan manages to interweave these colourful and finely observed character portraits with a political analysis that outlines the sort of historical and social pressures that can shape, embolden or even crush the lives he describes.

Obviously enough this sort of writing is made possible by a libertarian sen-



sibility that combines Utopian hope with a keen awareness of human frailty. In all of these essays we find an unresolved and creative tension between Ryan's attraction towards political romanticism that is tempered, undercut and sometimes completely usurped by an intelligent scepticism. This tension is one of main sources of the book's constant ironies, pathos and humour but it does also mean that the reader is occasionally left with the impression that the author is sometimes uneasy with some of his own political rhetoric. On the other hand there are some sections in the book in which Ryan's storytelling is disturbed and subsumed by political analysis and in one particular chapter, on the Milltown massacre, this certainly undermines the quality and impact of the piece. However, for the most part Ryan gets the balance right and this dynamic tension means the writing never degenerates into political liturgy or a disconnected series of anecdotes.

Despite the fact that *Clandestines* is a profoundly political book Ryan swerves away from answering in a systematic way the political questions that his varied experiences have

thrown up. And these are pertinent and difficult questions for the anti-capitalist movement: for instance how should libertarians relate to national liberation struggles, how do we forge meaningful grassroots democracy, what is to be taken and what is to be dispensed with from the Marxist tradition, and most consistently Ryan poses questions about how solidarity is built between activists from the global north and those struggling in the global south. These issues are explored but left unresolved however it would be a mistake to believe this is because Ryan is either naive or unreflective. He clearly marks these issues over the course of his essays and understands their significance. Neither can this be attributed to a lack of interest in political theory as *Clandestines* is clearly influenced by the work of, amongst others, the radical historians Galeano, Linebaugh and Federici, the situationist theorist Vaneigem and of course the whimsical and passionate writings of Sub-Commandante Marcos of the EZLN. It is also obvious from his analysis of Latin American politics and his critique of Kurdish Marxist guerillas that he has absorbed the best of libertarian thought right into his bones. Nonetheless, Ryan chooses to avoid neat and easy an-

## Ryan's singular account of an unusual activist life paradoxically serves as a metaphor for the anti-capitalist movement as a whole in all its contradictions.

swers as he crisscrosses the Atlantic marking historical transitions, observing and organising, and chasing hope in the face of a whirlwind of neoliberal and imperialist destruction.

All the same, or perhaps because of this refusal, Ryan's singular account of an unusual activist life paradoxically serves as a metaphor for the anti-capitalist movement as a whole in all its contradictions. Ryan's tales trace the patterns of globalisation from below and his search for new political communities, his desire to sustain hope, his discovery of a new world in the making in a forgotten corner of Mexico, his questioning of how we can fruitfully anchor our own life sto-

ries within grand historical narratives, his suspicion of easy answers, even his celebration of glorious and seedy marginality makes him, despite his steadfast refusal of such roles, something close to an anti-capitalist Everyman.

If, for the most part, even *Clandestines* little imperfections are interesting, the book does deserve unequivocal criticism in one small regard. Although *Clandestines* is quite nicely produced with evocative black and white photos and hand drawn maps it does suffer somewhat from poor quality editing - there are quite a few typos, the occasional repetition and most seriously of all a certain unevenness in parts of the book that could of been simply remedied by some simple revisions or minor excisions.

That said *Clandestines* is a lively, humorous and, at times, a touching book. At his best Ryan captures both the poetry of everyday moments and the roar of history and, to use a phrase from the book describing one of his acquaintances, Ryan as a writer often "embodies what is seductive about the rebel milieu - smart, vigorous and passionately committed to some great mysterious ideal"

### Continued from back cover

eye tells him that for the time being the position is untenable. No, he retires at the first opportunity and rearranges his forces for another battle" (iv)

### Slaughter

It is interesting to compare this earlier pragmatism with his remarks in the more desperate time that followed the outbreak of World War One, when the world's workers were engaged in slaughtering each other over a quarrel between the European ruling class. Connolly had also seen the defeat of organised Dublin workers in the lockout of 1913 - these experiences shifted him towards an insurrectionalist politics where the possession and willingness to use arms came above political considerations, and propaganda was replaced by preparation for rebellion. Connolly in January 1916 wrote that "Revolutionists who shirk from giving blow for blow until the great day has arrived, and they have every shoe-string in its place, and every man has got his gun, and the enemy has kindly consented to postpone action in order not to needlessly harry the revolutionists, nor disarrange their plans - such revolutionists only exist in two places - the comic opera stage, and the stage of Irish national politics" (v)

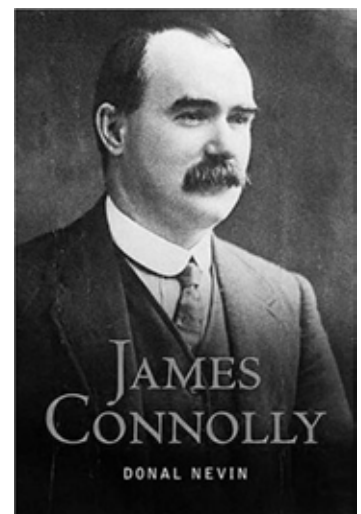
Connolly is of course most widely remembered as one of the leaders of the 1916 rebellion in Dublin. His memory being all the more poignant as he was the last of the leaders to be executed, incapable of standing because of his wounds and so shot sitting in a chair in Kilmainham jail.

It is Connolly's melding of syndicalism, insurrectionalism and militant nationalism that ensured his memory would live on but also that his legacy could be claimed by just about any vaguely radical political organisation. Yet in early 1915 he wrote in the *Irish Worker* that (vi) "the most sacred duty of the working class of Ireland is to seize every available opportunity to free itself from the ravenous maw of the capitalist system and lay the foundations for the Co-operative Commonwealth - the Working Class Republic" (vii) This and the program he published in January 1916 reveal he had not simply abandoned his revolutionary syndicalism for nationalism.

Nevin's book, because of its exhaustive nature, is an excellent source of material for those who want to see how Connolly's politics developed and how he tried to square the circle with regards to nationalism and revolutionary syndicalism. It is

a useful tool in extracting the real James Connolly from the ideological resin he has been preserved in.

- i James Connolly 'A Full life', Donal Nevin, Gill & Macmillan, 2005, p34
- ii , p86
- iii , p265
- iv , p303
- v , p597
- vi , p572
- vii , p573





# Book Review

*James Connolly 'A full life' by Donal Nevin*

**Published by Gill and Macmillan ISBN 0-7171-3911-5, £24.99/euro29.99**

**By Andrew Flood**

Revolutionary martyrs, being unable to speak for themselves, are liable to be claimed by all sorts of organisations with whom in real life they would have had little in common. When they are of national or international importance, like the Irish syndicalist James Connolly, this also means that biographies often tend to be very partisan affairs, aimed at recruiting the dead to one cause or another. The story of their life becomes reduced to a morality tale whose conclusion is whatever positions the author holds dear today.

Donal Nevin's biography "James Connolly: A Full life" is thankfully free from this approach. Nevin is a retired union official, a position which helped give him access to material not accessible to some previous biographers. The biography is however free of any open attempt to justify modern trade unions' practices by discovering a reformist Connolly. Instead this massive volume is obviously the legacy of a long labour of love and many years of research. Its flaw is its vastness, running to 800 pages and divided not chronologically but into subject chapters. It would be a poor choice for someone new to Connolly or the period as an introductory text.

Because of Connolly's place in Irish history and the problems that often come with partisan biographies, his early activity is often ignored or skimmed over in biographies, reduced down to a series of lessons

learnt for his later life. Nevin's biography covers his early activism in Dublin and New York in a detail that will be fascinating to any member of a revolutionary organisation. The frustration of members not turning up for events, of irresponsible behaviour in which the organisation's premises are trashed and of not bothering with the vital work of distributing publications is all there. Likewise the day-to-day mundane economic difficulties of funding a life as a revolutionary activist are detailed. From his own writings Connolly comes across as someone who may have been quite hard to work with. The overall effect is to remove Connolly from the pedestal that the left has put him on and return him to the land of mortals.

## IWW

The depth of detail on his early activism restores Connolly the Social Democrat. The early Connolly writes in 'Justice' that the Scottish Socialist Federation is sending a delegate to the Zurich Congress of the Socialist International who will have a free vote on every issue except that he is to oppose the admission of anarchists to the international! (i) Yet after migrating to New York and becoming a full time organiser for the revolutionary syndicalist Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) Connolly writes that an ideal Socialist Labour Party would be "dominated by Industrial Unionists rather than 'pure and simplers'; if it was elected by the Industrial Unions and controlled entirely by them, and capable at any moment of having its delegates recalled by the unions and had also its mandate directly from the rank and file organised in the workplace, it would

be just the party we want." Connolly acknowledged that his ideas had changed in this period, replying to a later syndicalist critique that 'Erin's Hope' failed to deal with the economic organisation of workers, by saying the reviewer had forgotten the pamphlet was first printed in 1897 and "We confess to have learned something since" (ii)

Far from being uncompromising, Connolly is capable of being pragmatic, writing of his decision to join the Socialist Party that "I would rather have the IWW undertake both political and economic activity now, but as the great majority of workers in the movement are against me on that matter I do not propose to make my desires a stumbling block in the way of my co-operation with my fellow revolutionists" (iii) By political activity Connolly means standing in elections, the IWW had rejected electoralism.

Even on the question of industrial struggle, Connolly is capable of being pragmatic, writing in the Free Press in 1910 that "Strikes would be ordered at the moment when the boss was least able to meet them; would be refused, no matter what the provocation, when it was apparent the boss desired or expected them; and when strikes went on and would entail much suffering without great certainty of victory, the strikers would march back to work and bide their time for another strike at a more propitious moment. A general in command of an army does not consider it a point of duty to expend his last cartridge and lose his last man if his experienced

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