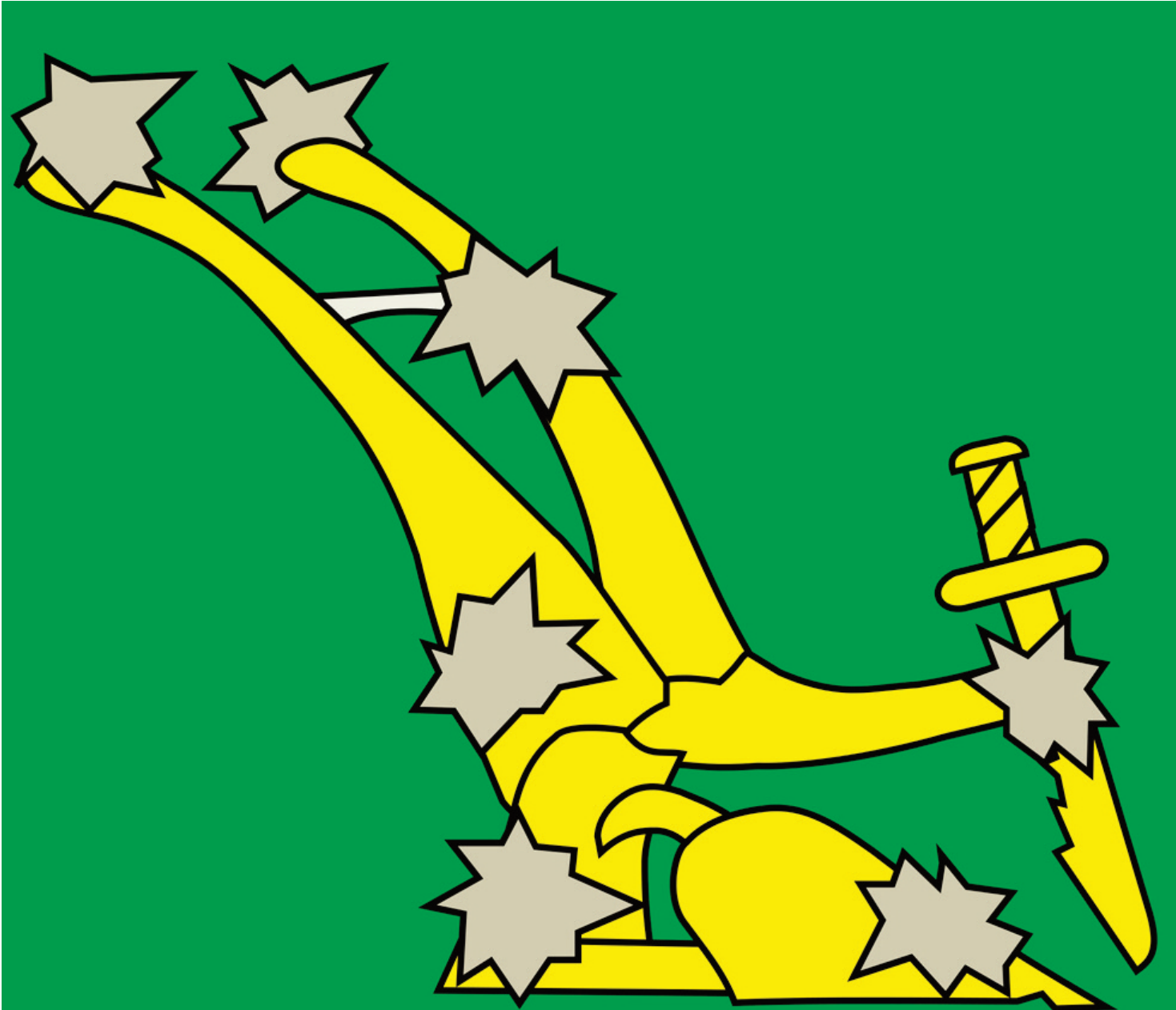


A Democratic Programme for the Twenty-First Century



A Democratic Programme for the 21st Century

Introduction

ALMOST A hundred years ago the first Dáil Éireann adopted a Democratic Programme, which declared “the right of the people of Ireland to the ownership of Ireland and to the unfettered control of Irish destinies to be indefeasible.” It declared that “the Nation’s sovereignty extends not only to all men and women of the Nation, but to all its material possessions, the Nation’s soil and all its resources, all the wealth and all the wealth-producing processes within the Nation, and we reaffirm that all right to private property must be subordinated to the public right and welfare.”

That programme, while expressing the aspirations of the Irish people at the time, retains its relevance today; but these aspirations have been frustrated and defeated many times since then by forces both native and external. The long historical struggle of our people remains incomplete. Our desire to build a free and independent sovereign state has never been realised.

The capitalist economic system that we live under is prone to cycles of boom and bust and is based on the exploitation of working people. It is a society in which the wealth created by working people is owned and controlled by a small minority. It is incapable of bringing about a civilised society: it is built on and sustained by inequality. Capitalism is also responsible for the deepening global environmental catastrophe. Women and men, local and migrant workers, employed and unemployed, are pitched against each other to ensure greater profits for that small minority. The very idea of mutual support and solidarity between people is a complete anathema to this system.

Our rulers, both domestic and external, tell us that sovereignty and independence are no longer relevant in the modern world, subsumed in the larger “European bloc” that is the EU. We disagree. This “European bloc” was constructed to serve the interests of international finance and transnational corporations. These forces and their institutions of control have no interest in serving the people.

The working people of Ireland have to take control if we are to end poverty, unemployment, emigration, and the destruction of urban and rural communities, discrimination based on gender, religion, race, or sexuality. Every generation since the foundation of this state has experienced mass unemployment and mass emigration. Our towns and villages are falling silent with the departing footsteps of our youth. Our communities are riven by drugs, poverty, and homelessness.

Working people, both urban and rural, have always had to wait in line and to fight for anything that we have gained. What we have gained is now being taken away. Each generation has had to fight to defend what their parents and grandparents struggled for. Working people, women and men, young and old, need to advance beyond this constant battle over the same issues: we need to transcend these constant, repetitive struggles to have our views heard, our needs and aspirations met.

To bring about lasting change we need to move beyond the narrow concept of democracy allowed by the establishment. Working people have little influence over the decisions of the Irish state, let alone the European institutions. Again and again the political manifestos we vote for are torn up the day after the election. Replace a disastrous government with new faces and the policies remain the same. It is “the markets,” we are told, that determine policy.

Economic power, and therefore political power, is concentrated in fewer and fewer hands. All aspects of our lives are controlled by their institutions, their state, their laws. Working people need to change the substance, content and objectives of democracy to reflect our interests.

The capitalist economic system prevents the development of a truly just and democratic society—a society in which men and women are equal, a society built on respect for age and youth, in which our language and culture are respected and encouraged, in which the public good is given priority over markets and profits, in which we have control and influence over all aspects of our lives: in our places of work, in our communities, within our families—an economic system serving the working people.

Sovereignty and independence are not nostalgic concepts but belong to the present day. They are essential tools that we need to secure in our own hands in order to change society. Sovereignty and independence can be gained and secured only by a popular struggle in which the working class plays a central role. This struggle takes many forms and cannot be limited to electoral considerations.

Our immediate task is geared towards a form of national revolution to achieve democracy, sovereignty, and independence, comparable to the original Democratic Programme of the first Dáil Éireann. We believe, however, that there are enough forces engaged in the struggles of today for a unified movement to be built and to put forward and develop the strategies laid out in this document.

The Communist Party of Ireland presents this Democratic Programme as part of what we believe is a necessary conversation that all our people need to engage in. We do not seek or advocate the restructuring of the capitalist economic system into a more equitable system by simply regulating or reforming the extremes within the system. There are internal contradictions that simply cannot be overcome. The system needs the extremes and needs to exploit the mass of working people; it needs the bondage of debt on working people, and it needs inequality between peoples and nations; and it needs war and the destruction of nations to preserve and maintain its existence.

Because of this, the capitalist economic system and its institutions cannot be reformed, and we are firmly of the belief that only socialism can truly bring about the necessary economic, social and political changes that are really in the interests of working people and our country. We see the implementation of this Democratic Programme as laying the basis for radical social change and for an advance towards socialism, by highlighting the contradictions inherent in the system. This can be achieved only by a conscious risen people, who want a better future determined by and shaped by the people themselves and not by a small ruling elite.

This Democratic Programme for the Twenty-First Century is the Communist Party of Ireland’s contribution to the debate within the working-class movement that is necessary for building a strategy for an advance towards socialism.



Twenty-First Century

OVER THE course of the twentieth century working people made significant advances in their places of work and in their communities, largely achieved through political and trade union struggles at the expense of capital: better pay, pensions, health and safety at work and in estates, public housing, public transport, maternity rights, child benefit and unemployment welfare payments, among other gains.

The last thirty years, and especially the last six years of “austerity,” have seen these advances attacked and undermined. We cannot allow the gains won by workers in the twentieth century to be wiped out. Not alone must the cuts of the austerity years be undone, including budgetary cuts to health and education, restoring public-sector pay and pensions, restoring child benefit payments and unemployment welfare, but much deeper economic and social change is also needed. Workers, who produce all the wealth in society, must have control over how it is distributed. They should decide the economic and social priorities in a truly democratic society, a new Ireland.

Democracy and equality at work

In 1913, working people and their families fought for the right to collectively organise their own unions and to negotiate with employers on the basis of their own collective organisations. A hundred years later this right has not yet been established in law.

Workers have a right to join a trade union under existing law, but this right must be vindicated by enacting legislation to provide for trade union recognition and free collective bargaining. Collective bargaining provides workers with a voice and real power in the work-place and protects and enhances pay and terms and conditions of employment.

Regressive parts of the Industrial Relations Act (1990) should be repealed to allow workers to participate in and support solidarity strikes and secondary picketing. The imposition of the British anti-union laws has also hindered workers in the North of Ireland from defending and advancing their interests. All these anti-worker laws must be challenged and defeated.

Repudiating the debt

Private and corporate debt was socialised by the state to protect private investors, both domestic and foreign. This debt was unjustly placed on the shoulders of families and communities. Global banks, finance houses and debt speculators need the Irish people to service this debt: to these institutions it is more important that we service this debt, as it is a source of vast, stable profits, than that it is ever fully paid off.

The Irish establishment and the European Union have given priority to servicing this debt over everything else. It is not so much that the austerity programme is a response to the debt: it is more that the debt is used to justify imposing austerity on the Irish people. In addition, the debt has been used by government and employers as a pseudo-justification for the most vicious assault on our rights and services.

The debt has been the basis on which attacks have been made on working people in both the private and the public sector by the Irish state, at the behest of the EU and IMF. This debt and Ireland’s position as a debtor impinge on the state’s ability to pursue a sovereign, independent direction, even should it wish to do so.

The debt must be challenged directly and explicitly. It is

not ours, and so must be repudiated. This is not just a question of economics: it is also a question of democracy.

Active reconsideration of our continued participation in the euro zone, which is clearly tied to continuing austerity, the repudiation of the debt and the implementation of more comprehensive policies to reduce dependence on international finance capital are fundamental to achieving real change and are the only basis on which a sovereign, democratic republic can be built. This question cannot be ignored.

A just system of taxation

In the interim period before the complete social ownership of capital there is a need for a major overhaul of the taxation system. The burden of tax has shifted greatly from capital to labour. Workers now bear the brunt of taxation, paying for subsidies to businesses and for substandard services. Comprehensive reforms are needed to change this.

Loopholes and irresponsible incentives for big business must be closed. Corporation tax should be raised, and a financial transaction tax (and controls on capital flows in and out of the state), a wealth tax on the rich and a higher bracket for those paid more than €100,000 a year should be introduced. Regressive charges for public services must be abolished and incorporated in a reformed progressive income tax structure.

Unfettered public ownership and control of our resources

At present, publicly owned companies are not always run to serve the people but are sometimes distorted to meet the needs of vested private economic interests. We have valuable natural resources, including oil, gas, wind and wave power, and fisheries. These need to be nationalised and run as income-generating state enterprises—just as the ESB has been—to provide income to the state and quality, affordable services to the public.

By better using renewable sources we can create far greater sustainability and at last reduce our dependence not only on damaging fuels but also on the monopoly global energy providers.

Publicly owned companies should act as supports for social and economic development while being protected from falsely contrived “competition”—as in the case of the ESB being forced to increase its prices to make it profitable for private enterprise to compete—and public monopolies should be protected. These publicly owned companies not only provide quality jobs and services: they have also trained and educated thousands of workers, and they can provide the skilled work force needed for building an alternative society.

No to privatisation

The privatisation of crucial state infrastructure (water, banking, energy, public transport and the national airline) should be stopped and reversed; but significant reform may be required to get the best out of these public assets. A national development corporation whose remit is the development of public enterprise in the interests of the people will be necessary to oversee and plan all this. The only sure guarantee of the people’s needs is the full social ownership of these resources and, ultimately, of all the economy.



A foreign policy we can be proud of

Irish neutrality, which has reflected credit on and earned respect internationally for this country over many years, must be enhanced, protected and guaranteed by a constitutional amendment. We must end the use of Shannon Airport and Irish air space by the US and EU war machines. Ireland should withdraw from all involvement in the EU's military structures and programmes and the PFP—NATO's so-called "Partnership for Peace" project—thus making a clear statement of independence. Priority should be given to building an alternative form of international relations based on mutual respect for sovereignty and support for peoples struggling for sovereignty and independence.

A real people's democracy

Voting every few years to elect an institution with limited power does not meet the needs of working people. People like Connolly and Pearse had a more substantial vision of democracy and participation by the Irish people than the one imposed on us, which continues to fail to meet the people's needs and aspirations.

The limited form of democracy that we have is increasingly being shown to give very limited expression to the people's wishes and does not reflect the needs and interests of working people. We need a much deeper democratic transformation of society that gives everyone the right to active and direct participation in the formation and implementation of political and economic policy. A sovereign people will be fully engaged in all decision-making in society: political, economic, social, and cultural. No aspect of our lives should be beyond the people's control, and they should have the democratic power to change their society as they choose.

A real people's democracy should be based on the full democratic control by the people over all decisions affecting their lives. While we work towards full democracy, there are many interim measures that should be implemented. All local and national budgets should be published as draft budgets and subject to an extensive citizens' debate process every year; and all elected representatives should be recallable by petition or referendum.

A sovereign democratic republic

A sovereign democratic republic is needed for the twenty-first century, to provide a decent and fulfilling life for all citizens in Ireland. The essential parts of this programme all point towards the building of a new republic and a new state, a democratic society where women and men are equal, with equal opportunity to fulfil their aspirations, that can overcome the effects of the long history of the oppression of women, a democratic society that is non-sexist, non-racist, and secular. A new constitution is needed to guarantee this and to make these changes lasting, to embed them in the very structures of a new democratic, sovereign republic.

Democracy and the European Union

The European Union by its very nature is anti-democratic, as it is designed to serve the interests of big business, thereby preventing the people from exercising control over their lives. Inevitably, the implementation of this Democratic Programme would bring us into conflict with membership of the euro zone, with the proposed Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, with the World Trade Organisation, with the International Monetary Fund and, more fundamentally, with the European Union itself.

This is because of the deep and real contradictions that exist between the EU's plans for the Irish people, which prevent real democratic control, and the struggle to build a meaningful and lasting alternative that shifts the balance of power to working people and away from the EU. People should have no illusions about this: we must stand strong and united in our desire to build a truly sovereign and democratic republic in the twenty-first century.

The all-Ireland perspective

The division of our country has crippled the working class and strengthened the hand of reaction throughout our country. The two entities, undemocratically imposed under the threat of war and in alliance with sections of the nationalist and unionist capitalists, whose economic interests depended on continuing links with British and global capitalism, have clearly failed to meet the needs of our people and have in fact created the conditions for strengthening the divisions and antagonism among our people, which had been carefully nurtured by the British state for centuries.

Partition and the Treaty stabilised the situation. In the South the potential for the increasingly militant labour movement to tip the balance in the national movement towards anti-imperialism was blocked, and the more conservative elements retained control of the state. In the North the influence of unionism over the Protestant working class was consolidated and directed towards the constitutional question and issues of national identity.

In both parts of Ireland this secured the hold of imperialism and entrenched the rule of conservatism, sectarianism, and reaction.

All-Ireland social and economic initiatives can strengthen co-operation and go some way to counter divisions, but ultimately a new democratic independent state based on the unity of our people is the way forward.

The external domination of the two parts of our country has taken different forms, but the effect has been much the same: stunted development, poverty, emigration, clerical domination and religious bigotry. In the present situation, similar austerity programmes are being imposed by the EU in the South and by the British government in the North and are being implemented by Irish politicians.

The people in the South have little real say in the policies dictated by Brussels, while the people in the North are triply marginalised: they have little or no influence in London, Brussels, or Dublin. The people need real independence and a proper participative democracy. Real and lasting change can be brought about only by the conscious actions and struggles of the people working together.

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