common threads

A CITY IN COMMON:
THE RADICAL POTENTIAL OF IRELAND'S
ECO-TRANSPORT STRUGGLES.

THE POLITICAL AND PERSONAL
LANDSCAPE OF CHOICE IN IRELAND

FROM APATHY TO REBELLION:
THE WATER WAR IN IRELAND.

DOMINATION, CAPITALISM, AND
ECONOMIC CRISES.

april 2016

EDITORIAL

Welcome to the first edition of Common Threads. At the time of going to press, the political context is uncertain. In Ireland, what appears to be a massive victory for grassroots direct action is changing our perception of politics from that of spectators to that of participants.

Homelessness and growing poverty combined with talk of 'recovery' illustrate precisely what the elite conception of 'recovery' entails for the rest of us, and the dramatic servitude of the Irish political elite to business and Europe is laid bare.

As the struggle to repeal the eighth amendment, granting half of the Irish population basic human rights continues, it appears change will be won (though never soon enough). While references to the 1916 rising abound, talk of revolution is pushed into conversation - though government and private media seek to strip it of any political meaning.

In Europe there is a presiding sentiment of anger and disillusionment due to the economic failure of the European Union. The added attacks of austerity from Europe, plus the unrelenting assault on organised labour and democracy by private capital intensifies hardship and unrest.

Internationally, a series of papers published in recent weeks show that previous forecasts of the severity of climate change were far too optimistic. Sea level rise is a much more urgent reality than previously believed; evidence is growing of coming 'superstorms' in North West Europe - a consequence of the effects of icemelt mixing with ocean water in the North Atlantic. The response to climate change by national and international institutions has tragically been but one of lip service; the most recent climate change negotiations in Paris are widely recognised as a failure, which could prove fatally costly.

The possibility of global military conflict remains alarming, and is worsening; altercations such as those between Russia and NATO member Turkey in Syria could be a spark from which a major international conflict could occur.

The purpose of this magazine is to provide perspective on some of the many issues we face as activists, and as people concerned about our shared future. Common Threads offers commentary and discussion on struggles, highlighting the necessity of grassroots democratic organisation in both empowering us to challenge state and capitalist power and in using them as a blueprint for a future and better organised society.

Contents

A City in Common: The Radical Potential of Ireland's Eco-Transport Struggles
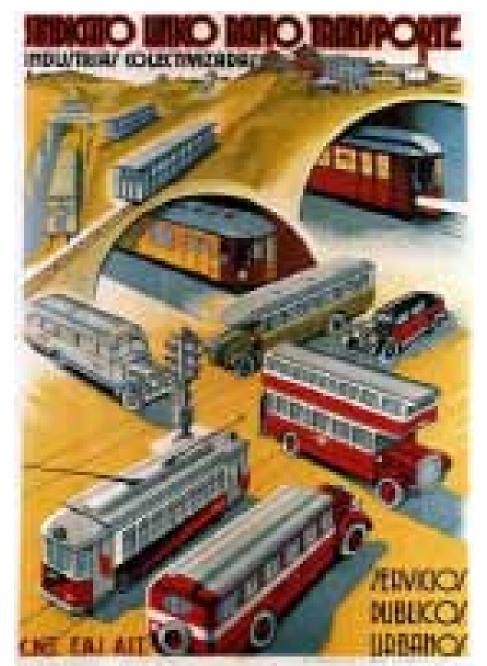

Image: Poster of the worker-managed Barcelona transit system in 1930s Anarchist Spain, 1936-9.

Could climate change become a catalysing force for radical social transformation in Ireland? Recent struggles around public transport in Ireland prompt us to think along these lines.

During the spring of 2016, Luas workers went on strike for decent pay and for terms and conditions similar to workers in other public transport services [1]. Similarly, in Autumn 2015, Irish Rail workers went on strike, primarily in opposition to the EU Commission and the Irish government's gradual moves towards privatisation [2].

Previously, in Spring 2015, Dublin Bus and Bus Éireann workers went on strike over plans by the National Transport Authority to tender out 10% of public routes to private operators. SIPTU's banner at Liberty Hall outlined why: 'Say No to Privatisation; privatisation results in fare increase, reduced services, a threat to free travel, a bad deal for taxpayers and job cuts'.

SIPTU and NBRU members and strike organisers have emphasised the damage privatisation will do to society, primarily concentrating on the loss of community services and the race to the

> "During World War Two, for example, as pleasure driving was virtually eliminated to conserve fuel, the use of public transport increased by 87 per cent in the US and by 95 per cent in Canada."

bottom in bus drivers' terms and conditions [3]. The striking workers deserve our support and their claims should be taken seriously.

This is definitely the case when the regime media adhere to a deeply unimaginative line, loudly declaiming traffic disruption to an imagined city of angry consumers and silently accepting the hollowing out of public services [4].

At the same time, however, we also need to think about what's not being said, about the words that don't make it on to the papers or the banner.

The missing planet
In these recent clashes between the defenders of public services and the agents of privatisation, an articulated concern for the planet's capacity to sustain life is strangely missing.

This is, perhaps, unsurprising. In Ireland, as elsewhere, the crisis of 2007 and ensuing recession have provided governments of both left- and right-wing hues with a pretext to accelerate fossil fuel extraction in pursuit of 'growth'.

Fighting austerity, it seems, has swept discussions of climate change to the margins of electoral and movement-based politics. All the while, capitalism's 'grow or die' imperative continues to take a toll on a finite planet. The same week as the Dublin bus strike, scientists observed record carbon dioxide (CO2) concentrations in the atmosphere.

This 400ppm (parts per million) record is a milestone for global warming and comes nearly three decades after what is considered the 'safe' level of 350ppm was passed [5]. Public transport clearly plays a crucial role here: each full standard bus can take more than 50 cars off the road while a full train can eliminate over 600[6]. In these circumstances, failing to link public transport with environmental sustainability is not just strange oversight but suicidal blindness.

Part of not seeing the problem involves seeing phantom solutions. As Prole.info puts it, whenever the need for a real critique of the capitalist system is strongly felt, distorted, self-defeating, pseudo-critiques multiply [7].

> "an estimated 380,000 people living in rural areas do not have access to the transport services they require"

The climate crisis will not be resolved in such a way as to sustain a life-supporting ecosystem by corporate philanthropy, by miraculous scientific fixes or by individuals greening their consumption habits or lifestyles. Similarly, the profit margins that might attract private capital into green production or sustainable transport are not there [8].

A good example of this occurred in March 2014 when air pollution in French cities reached dangerously high levels. Officials in Paris

decided to discourage car use by making public transit free for three days.

Private transport operators would strenuously resist such measures, and yet these are precisely the kinds of actions that need to occur to battle increasing levels of atmospheric carbon. "Rather than allowing bus fares to rise while service erodes, we need to be lowering prices and expanding services – regardless of the costs' [8].

While there may be debate and discussion about the best way to respond to climate change, there is absolutely no scenario in which we can avoid large-scale social transformation while sustaining decent human survival. Wartime mobilisations provide the closest historical precedent for reducing carbon emissions on the scale that climate scientists indicate is necessary.

During World War Two, for example, as pleasure driving was virtually eliminated to conserve fuel, the use of public transport increased by 87 per cent in the US and by 95 per cent in Canada [8].

Today, it is no mystery where the vast work of ecological transition needs to take place. Much of it needs to happen in ambitious emission-reducing projects – smart grids, light rail and public transport systems, citywide composting systems, building retrofits, and urban redesigns to keep us from spending half our lives in traffic jams [8].

These changes need to be fair, so that those people already struggling to make ends meet are not asked to make additional sacrifices to offset the consumption and carbon emissions of the rich [8].

Climate change really does provide us with compelling reasons not just for the defence of public transport services but for their radical re-imagination, reconstruction and expansion. So why isn't this happening?

From the climate horrors to mass direct action

The problem at the present historical conjuncture, in Ireland as elsewhere, is that we have ceded our capacity to shape our societies to capital, to an aggressive, for-profit logic that runs directly counter to the sustainability of the planet's ecosystems and to humanity's survival as a species [9].

In Ireland, rampant capitalist development has ensured we have much work to do to arrive at even decent emission-reduction projects. In a recent Environmental Protection Agency report, 100% of respondents to a survey of local authorities felt that local public transport services were inadequate in their local areas; an estimated 380,000 people living in rural areas do not have access to the transport services they require [10].

While starving public transport of resources, boom-time governments encouraged private car ownership and usage. Between 2001 and 2009, instead of improving national and regional roads, the motorway system grew by 430% in Ireland.

There are now 2.5 times more kilometers of motorway per person in Ireland than in Britain [11]. Meanwhile, the good people at

Transport for Ireland encourage walking as the most environmentally friendly form of transport. ('Walking can support local shops and businesses, as pedestrians have the freedom to 'pop-in' to pick up goods [12]). Clearly, we have a lot of work to do. What form might that work take?

Starting from the current struggles, full support for the Luas, bus and train workers is in all our interests. If workers and unions wanted to circumvent hostile media and win over public opinion, they could refuse to collect fares [13]. We don't need privatisation - we do need a free public transport service, operated for passengers and run by the people with the best knowledge, the transport workers themselves. All of us have a role to play.

In Stockholm and Gothenburg, commuters are taking the initiative in the fight for decent, free

public transportation financed from progressive taxation. The "Planka" encourages people to 'free ride' on public transport. If you become a member with a monthly subscription, the group will then pay your fines if you get caught. Planka free-riding becomes a clever way to save money and, at the same time, is a political act for free public transport [14].

In the past, worker direct management of Barcelona's transport system during the revolution in Spain in the 1930s illustrates the ability and ingenuity of working people to directly manage the industries where they work.

Today, achieving a large-scale, green transition will necessitate combining direct actions against environmental destruction and mass mobilisations to pressure states into adopting green policies while supporting the popular creation and expansion of local, co-operative economies in food and energy [8, 9].

In Ireland, similarly, we need to trace the green links from community opposition to extractive projects in Mayo, Leitrim and Fermanagh through struggles over inhabiting city centres to the development of comprehensive programmes that make low-carbon lives possible for everyone.

Today's striking transport workers are not just defending their livelihoods they are also fighting for environmentally sustainable cities. An injury to one really is an injury to all.

WORDS: Tom Murray

References

[1] The Luas workers' claims were more than justified. Over the previous six years Luas increased passenger numbers by 5 million and revenues by 30%, with Transdev paying a dividend to its parent company of 2.8million in 2013/14. Source: Busworkers Action Group. See Brian Fagan, 2016, LUAS workers 'spitting on the constitution says right wing nut'; available http://www.wsm.ie/c/luas-workers-spitting-constitution-says-right-wing-nut
[2] Tom Murray, 2015, We defend Public Transport! (Of Irish Rail and EU Privatisation) Available http://www.wsm.ie/c/defend-public-transport-irish-rail-eu-privatisation
[3] See Scott Millar, 'Save Our Bus Service' in Liberty, April, 2015. Available athttp://www.siptu.ie/media/media_19045_en.pdf
[4] Number of Irish newspaper Nexis results with words 'strikes' and 'chaos' in headline: 288. Number of Irish newspaper Nexis results with words 'privatisation' and 'public transport' in headline: 3. Via Richard McAleavey, Facebook, 1st May. See https://hired-knaves.wordpress.com/ ; see also Tom Murray, 'Luas Strikes: Rage Against the Regime Media', February, 2015. Available http://www.wsm.ie/c/luas-strike-regime-media-bias
[5] Adam Vaughan (6.05.2015) 'Global carbon dioxide levels break 400ppm milestone' in The Guardian. Seehttp://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/may/06/global-carbon-dioxide-levels-break-400ppm-milestone
[6] Department of Transport and Main Roads, Queensland, AU. 'Benefits of Public Transport'. Available athttp://translink.com.au/about-translink/what-we-do/benefits-of-public-transport
[7] Prole.info, 2012, The Housing Monster. PM Press.
[8] Naomi Klein, 2014. This Changes Everything: Capitalism versus the Climate. London: Penguin.
[9] See Murray Bookchin, 2005, The Ecology of Freedom. AK Press.
[10] EPA, 2011, 'Barriers to Sustainable: Transport in Ireland. Available athttp://www.epa.ie/pubs/reports/research/climate/CCRP%20Report%20Series%20No.%207%20-%20Barriers%20to%20Sustainable%20Transport%20in%20Ireland.pdf
[11] Robert Emmet Hernan, 2011, Transport Policy in Ireland: Real and Imagined. Available at:http://www.irishenvironment.com/reports/transport-policy-in-ireland/
[12] Transport for Ireland is the "single public transport brand" which the National Transport Authority has developed to promote and integrate public transport provision in Ireland. "Good for the Environment and the Economy". Seehttps://www.transportforireland.ie/wp_super_faq/good-for-the-environment-and-the-economy-2/
[13] NBRU and SIPTU workers refused to collect fares when on strike in July, 2003. See Workers Solidarity, No. 76 published in August 2003.
[14] See http://planka.nu/

The political and personal landscape of choice in Ireland

It is all but impossible, both in theory and in practice, to legally obtain an abortion on the island of Ireland, both north and south of the imaginary border that divides this island.

It is completely impossible to safely and legally obtain an abortion anywhere in Ireland; the legal framework in the south specifically requires that in order to obtain an abortion without being criminalised for so doing, the woman who needs it must be ill enough to die; thus it is rendered impossible for her to be safe in access to legal abortion.

In the north, the Offences Against the Person Act dating from 1861 - over a century and a half ago - is what renders women taking control of whether or not they give birth and remain pregnant illegal. It describes abortion as 'procuring miscarriage', a description which is very apt for what those

who need abortions in the north of Ireland today are forced to do by this archaic bit piece of legislation; obtain the abortion pill illegally online via organisations like Women on Web, Women Help Women, or less reputable means.

It states that anyone who does this "shall be guilty of felony, and being convicted thereof shall be liable [..] to be kept in penal servitude for life".

However there was an exception made to this under the Criminal Justices Act of 1945. This Act, while it created the offence of "child destruction", defining it as "any wilful act [that] causes a child to die before it has an existence independent of its mother" allowed that such a "destruction" could be carried out without legal penalty if one is acting in good faith to preserve the life of the "mother".

Unlike in the south, this has been interpreted by subsequent judgements to mean not only that the woman must be on the brink of death, but also that the woman's health was important as well.

(In the south, the Supreme Court ruling on X in 1992 specifically excludes the woman's or girl's health from being in any way relevant to whether she is permitted to access an abortion.) In 1994 a court in the north found that this "does not relate only to some life-threatening situation.

Life in this context means that physical or mental health or well-being of the mother and the doctor's act is lawful where the continuance of the pregnancy would adversely affect the mental or physical health of the mother. The adverse effect must however be a real and serious one and there will always be a question of fact and degree whether the per-

ceived effect of non-termination is sufficiently grave to warrant terminating the unborn child." However it is very difficult to establish clearly the criteria under which this is deemed to be the case.; On the 26th of March of this year the Northern Ireland Executive finally agreed to publish guidelines for healthcare professionals on when it is legal for women to access abortion.

This was following enormous pressure on the Executive owing to a ruling from Belfast High Court in November 2015 which found that to deny abortions to women carrying pregnancies that will not survive to term, or beyond birth, or pregnant as a result of "sexual crime" was a breach of their human rights.

Again, as in the south, this legislative framework ensures that a woman cannot be safe if she is unwell and endangered enough to fit the criteria of being 'permitted' to access a legal abortion.

Despite the obvious outdatedness of the Offences Against the Person Act of 1861, there are nonetheless not one, but two pending prosecutions in Belfast at the moment under it. One is of a woman who procured the abortion pill for her teenage daughter; subsequent to its administration they both presented at a hospital in search of medical treatment, worried for the daughter's wellbeing.

Though details of the case are as yet unclear, it seems that a (presumably anti-choice) medical professional they encountered there felt the need to report them to the police for something twhat would render them open to life imprisonment. The second pending prosecution is of a woman in her twenties who obtained the abortion pill for herself and apparently for others.

Again, details of her situation are unclear, but given that there is no prosecution or pursuit of any of the over 200 women from the north who haves openly and deliberately incriminated themselves under their full names in repeated open letters and publications in various media as people who have needed access to the abortion pill, it seems likely that this prosecution too came about under pressure from another party.

The legal structure in the south of Ireland is the 8th amendment to the Irish constitution. It states that "The State acknowledges the right to life of the unborn and, with due regard to the equal right to life of the mother, guarantees in its laws to respect, and, as far as practicable, by its laws to defend and vindicate that right."

The obvious afterthought of the right to life of the carrier of the foetus granted was only included in the wording after a vigorous campaign from feminist groups of the time.

The referendum for its inclusion in the constitution of southern Ireland was passed in 1983 after a vitriolic debate in a referendum in which only 53% of the electorate voted. 67% of those who voted, voted for it. This means that a decision made by a mere 35% of the electorate of southern Ireland 32 years ago, none of whom are likely to be women of reproductive age today (the youngest a voter in that referendum would be now is 50), is deemed relevant and appropriate to force every person capable of becoming pregnant in the south of this island to remain that way regardless of that person's own opinion on the matter, underon threat of imprisonment.

The 8th amendment also strips, from any pregnant woman or other person, the right to consent or refuse any treatment a higher power than herself(!) may deem necessary for the foetus she carries in pregnancy. It also

means that it is at the whim of a medical treating power to deny a pregnant woman potentially life-saving medical treatment if they consider it may damage the foetus she carries, as was seen in the case of Michelle Harte.

Michelle Harte was a cancer sufferer who was receiving treatment denied to her by Cork University Hospital's "board of ethics" (what a misnomer) when she became accidentally pregnant.

The same ethics board denied her, a dying woman, access to an abortion and forced her to travel to the UK while incredibly ill with cancer to obtain the health-care she needed - an abortion. She subsequently died. A Catholic bishop sits on that 'ethics' board.

Since the context of choice and bodily autonomy in most public discussions, even most leftist public discussions, seems only to be understood as the choice to continue or to end a pregnancy, it is imperative to highlight that the 8th amendment is used also as a tool of coercion against women and others in continued pregnancy and during birth.

The 8th amendment is regularly cited to pregnant women wishing to go against what their doctor deems to be the best for them; the phrase, "I could bring you to court if I have to, you know" is one used against pregnant and birthing women in Ireland far too often. This is explicitly stated in the HSE's National Consent Policy, which cites the High Courts as the appropriate place to determine what can be perpetrated upon the body of a pregnant woman without her consent.

Doctors, midwives and social workers are more often those doing the coercing in this scenario; it rarely goes as far as the courts, as most women when told by the social workers who arrive on their doorstep (as has happened in more than one instance) that their existing children will be taken from them into care if they continue to refuse to comply with their doctor's vision of what is best for them, do not feel capable of struggling back when in all likelihood they will lose anyway. However there is one instance in which the High Court has been invoked, in Waterford in 2013 in the Mother A case.

The Mother A case involved Waterford Regional Hospital taking a woman, known as 'Mother A' by the court, to the High Court in an attempt to secure an order coercing her into a caesarean section.

They took this action despite the fact that Mother A was not utterly refusing to consent to a c section; she specifically said that despite her desire to have a vaginal birth, should an emergency arise, she would consent to a section.

It was not an emergency situation; the spur for the coerced c section was a foetal trace which was categorised by the person interpreting it as "non-reassuring" rather than emergency.

She also wanted to delay the birth by at least 24 hours, because her partner was out of the country until then and she wanted him to not only be present at the birth but also to be able to be there to care for their older child during the period she was in hospital. Further, while the hospital insisted she was 41 weeks and 6 days pregnant, she deeply disagreed with their assessment. (It is worth highlighting at this point a similar case in Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital in Drogheda in 2003 where a woman, Therese Darcy-Lampf, was coerced into a section at 34 weeks owing to the hospital having wrongly noted her gestation after a scan, despite the fact that she pointed this out to them repeatedly.

Her baby, Jessica, died shortly after being born far too early.) All very reasonable things to want; yet all things that were utterly

denied her at the apparently capricious behest of an obstetrician and a hospital that stripped her of her voice and her autonomy. No judgement was handed down in this case as the woman "consented" to the caesarean section before one became necessary.

The nightmarish reality of forced caesarean sections has now been publicly enshrined not only in Irish practice by the Mother A case, but also in law and in practice by the passing of the Protection of Life During Pregnancy Act of 2013.

The first draft of this bill was called the Protection of Maternal Life During Pregnancy Bill; but clearly this concept, that women should not die because we are pregnant, was deemed far too radical by the Labour-Fine Gael coalition government to pass into law and thus it was renamed to ensure that nobody reading it should become confused and think perhaps that women's lives matter.

Such confusion is however highly unlikely given the content of the Act, which requires that a suicidal woman must prove that she is suicidal to up to 6 doctors before eventually being granted a life-saving abortion. This despite the fact that suicide is a leading cause of death during pregnancy in Ireland, and despite the fact that we are constantly being reassured through ad campaigns telling us to 'please talk' (talk to whom is never made clear) that mental health is in fact real health.

It is only real health until it comes to pregnant women, as was made obvious by the atrocities perpetruated on Ms. Y by the medical establishment and the state in the south in 2014.

Ms. Y arrived in the south of Ireland on March 28th, 2014 as a refugee. At what is described as a "health screening". Six days later she found out she was pregnant; she made known to those performing the screening on behalf of the state that she had been raped and that she could not possibly under any circumstances have a child. She was very distressed.

A nurse made an appointment for her two days later with the IFPA who informed Ms. Y that abortion is not accessible in Ireland and that travel for her "may" be difficult - as an asylum seeker travel documents and visas into and out of Ireland are time consuming, costly and difficult to obtain.

The IFPA made an appointment for Ms. Y to have a dating scan and referred her to the Immigrant Council of Ireland for advice and support on travelling as a migrant. Four days later, Ms. Y hads a dating scan performed and it wais discovered she wais 8 weeks pregnant.

At this point it would have been possible to hand her three pills and for her to have ended her own pregnancy as she wished, with minimal impact on her, minimal further violation of her bodily autonomy and integrity, and minimal pain and suffering. Three pills.

Instead, she was handed about from pillar to post, having contact with three separate NGOs as well as the HSE staff she initially encountered, and her situation appears to have slipped between the cracks of these, unnoticed by anyone except herself as with the continuation of her pregnancy her despair and hopelessness deepened.

A doctor from Spirasi, one of the NGOs she had contact with, wrote to the GP of the direct provision centre she was consigned to, describing her as "having a death wish". The GP of this centre says that the letter was not received. A co-ordinator at the ICI formed the opinion that Ms. Y might change her mind about needing an abortion based on apparently nothing whatsoever.

A counsellor at the IFPA suggest-

ed adoption to her. For a further 16 weeks she was handed around and around until she eventually, on the 23rd of July, (almost four months after her pregnancy was first discovered and she initially declared herself utterly unable to contemplate going through with it), she had an assessment with a consultant psychiatrist who told her it was too late to have an abortion and then coerced her into being detained in a maternity hospital under constant surveillance, where she refused all food and fluids for several days.

By that timenow she had met a consultant obstetrician who was of the opinion, despite the fact that Ms. Y was so despairing and suicidal that she was even refusing water, "that Ms Y could be maintained on the ward for as long as possible and hopefully to 30 weeks so that the baby could be delivered appropriately."

This would have meant another 6 weeks of detention against her will; another 6 weeks of sedation against her will in order to forcibly feed and hydrate her against her will in order that her body and autonomy undergo repeated violations in order to host a pregnancy she loatheds so much she would rather have died than have it in her body any longer. Instead however, as Ms. Y continued in her determination to refuse fluids, a caesarean section was carried out on her several days later; enforced major abdominal surgery, also against her will.

This horrifying and traumatic ordeal inflicted upon Ms. Y was torture; state-sanctioned, state-inflicted torture, state-legalised torture. And were another Ms. Y to arrive in the south tomorrow, in the same harrowing circumstances, the state would more than likely torture her in precisely the same manner.

It is important to note here the degree toin which the maternity hospitals in the south are complicit in, and even the driving forces behind, the denial of basic bodily autonomy to pregnant women; both in abortion and in continued pregnancy.

It is for these reasons that those of us who are involved in the pro-choice movement should be deeply wary of embracing the "masters" (the word alone should be warning) of the Dublin maternity hospitals such as Rhona Mahoney and Peter Boylan when they declare themselves to be opposed to the 8th amendment. At least one of those 'masters' has been known to invoke going to the courts in order to coerce pregnant women into interventions during their pregnancies, labour and births, and both of them are opposed to women's choice of type of care (midwife-led or obstetrician-led) and the choice even of birth position in the case of Peter Boylan.

Furthermore Peter Boylan in 2015 testified in the High Court in defence of the barbaric practice of symphysiotomies. Tempting though it is to reach for a "higher authority" in defence of our stance, these are not our allies in the struggle for women's bodily autonomy.

However those who are our allies in this struggle are, in fact, the majority of the voting public in the south. An exit poll carried out at the general election in February of this year found that 64% of people support the repeal of the 8th amendment. This number is all the more invigorating for those of us in the trenches of this fight given the increasing vehemence of the well-funded anti-choicers over the last number of years.

It's also all the more inspiring because there's a general misunderstanding of what the pro-choice position is in the public discourse around abortion in the south; the case is constructed as "Would you agree with and support her decision in this case?" rather than "Would you personally stop her?", a much truer reflection of what the pro-choice stance is and means.

As the fight continues, it becomes more and more important to avoid the slippery slope of only publicly advocating and arguing for abortion access in terms of the "hard cases", such as where the pregnancy will not survive outside the womb or in the case of survivors of rape. The majority of those who seek abortions do not fall into these categories and would be left by the wayside.

Only allowing abortion access for pregnancies conceived by rape and incest would not only be impossible to legislate safely for but also makes clear that the enforcement of continuation of unwanted pregnancy because the woman chose to have sex is outright misogyny; either one believes that an embryo or foetus has rights overriding that of the person carrying it or one does not.

We own our own bodies. We are not property of any state. We can and will birth where, how, and if we choose.

WORDS: Sinéad Redmond

GROUPS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT

WHW
women help women

GET ABORTION PILLS:
WOMENHELP.ORG

abortion support network

NEED TO TRAVEL FOR AN ABORTION?
ABORTIONSUPPORT.ORG.UK

Abortion
RIGHTS CAMPAIGN

HELP REPEAL THE 8TH!
ABORTIONRIGHTSCAMPAIGN.IE

lúnasa
CÁIFE
WORKERS' COOPERATIVE

WE ARE A WORKER OWNED CO-OPERATIVE,
WE SERVE FRESHLY COOKED MEALS IN
HOUSE ON A DAILY BASIS. WE ALSO OFFER
PRIVATE BOOKINGS OR CATERING SERVICES.

44-46 KING STREET, BELFAST

CREATIVE WORKERS COOPERATIVE

THE CWC IS A WORKERS' CO-OPERATIVE. OUR
MEMBERS HAVE A DIVERSE ARRAY OF SKILLS,
IN DESIGN, FILM AND PHOTOGRAPHY, AS WELL
AS A BACKGROUND IN COMMUNITY AND SOCIAL
ACTIVISM.

48 KING STREET, BELFAST

From apathy to rebellion: the water war in Ireland.

No one saw this coming, not even the veteran activists. Hundreds of thousands resisting neoliberal economic policies would have been difficult to imagine even at the height of the Campaign Against Home and Water Charges.

Although that campaign, primarily fighting against the regressive Household Charge and the subsequent Property Tax, was nationwide, it never quite built the momentum that we've seen with the anti-water charges campaign, though not for lack of effort on the part of activists. The CAHWT failed in its objective of defeating the Property Tax, the resistance effort however was not in vain; it prepared the ground for the current phase of struggle. In grassroots communities across the country, CAHWT community groups gained confidence and experience in how to organise while building lasting networks with each other. Importantly, the CAHWT also normalised political protest; people grew accustomed to seeing protesters and sympathised with them, however in this instance when it came to the crunch they still paid up when the government told them to.

So despite some positive outcomes, the CAHWT failed, leaving many campaigners thoroughly demoralised as they had campaigned hard for over two years only to see the majority of people pay the new regressive taxes. As 2014 was coming to an end, the government began to prepare for the implementation of water charges after their success with implementing the Property Tax and many exhausted CAHWT groups felt there was not much point in fighting it based on the public reaction to the last government attack.

As Irish Water began its program of water meter installations nationwide, likely targeting the areas of high compliance with the Property Tax first, they were unexpectedly met with localised resistance. Water meter contractors would arrive in an area to carry out some minor excavation works and meter installations to find members of the local community dismantling their safety barriers, climbing on their equipment, or standing so close to machinery that it could not safely be operated. These efforts were widely publicised on social me-

"Disobedience, in the eyes of anyone who has read history, is man's original virtue. It is through disobedience that progress has been made, through disobedience and through rebellion." - Oscar Wilde.

"Anti-water charges campaign groups began to form on their own, in areas where there was no recent history of resistance."

dia, particularly Facebook, where they received significant levels of support. Many of the people involved in this direct action were elderly people or people who had not been involved in anything like this before.

Anti-water charges campaign groups began to form on their own, in areas where there was no recent history of resistance. Momentum appeared to be building but still exhausted CAHWT groups were trying to recover their energy and were not as active as they had previously been.

The Right2Water campaign, composed primarily of trade unions and left wing politicians and parties, launched in August 2014 with a loose set of criteria for joining: "All you need to be part of the campaign is to believe that water is a human right and that water charges should be abolished." The campaign came to serve as an umbrella group for community groups, left wing parties and trade unions to affiliate with, but did not have a formal democratic structure and could not direct members to particular courses of action.

Then on October 11th 2014 a large anti-water charges demonstration exploded onto the scene, with attendance in the tens of thousands and a vibrant energy that further added to the sense that a new wave of people was indeed ready to stand and fight.

Many were new to political activism but their energy boosted the veteran campaigners whose organising experience meant this new anti-water charges campaign hit the ground running.

This surge in working class activity has been building for a long time, fostered both by constant government attacks on our public services and standards of living and also by the persistent and extraordinary efforts of the ordinary people who fought these attacks. While this campaign has been extremely popular by any measure, many of its participants view it in different ways and are hoping for different outcomes.

Political parties normally look at campaigns like these as a way to gain publicity and to pull in a few more activists with the aim of increasing their share of the vote come election time. From that perspective, campaigns are just things that you participate in to strengthen the party, not to strengthen the working class.

Anarchists look at campaigns like this as an opportunity for working class people to build our own knowledge, confidence, networks, organisational capacities and political consciousness so that no matter who is in government, we will be able to organise to defend ourselves.

State power
The world that we want will never and can never be delivered through the state. Though many engaged in struggles around water charges and housing sincerely believe that the capture of state power through parliamentary means can be used to end poverty and homelessness, this is simply not possible. While elec-

tions appear to be a shortcut to political power, in reality they are a trap, designed to undermine, split, roll back and destroy working class political power and organisations.

When a determined left wing government is elected global capitalism acts to dismantle this. This is either done through subverting a country's economy which we have recently seen with Syriza in Greece, or a more violent approach is taken, as was the case with Chile in 1973 when the left wing government of Salvador Allende was overthrown through as US backed military coup of the Chilean military.

What we should be aiming for during the current surge in working class activity is not to build political parties who would act on our behalf but instead to strengthen our existing campaign groups with a view to maintaining and increasing our own capacity to defend ourselves. Building a stronger working class movement should be our short term goal, not building a party up for the next electoral circus. Undermining and destroying a political party is a lot easier than a militant working class.

Building working class power.
If you have never been involved in political activity before, the anti-water charges movement has functioned as a way of acting collectively with others to directly confront Irish Water through protest, marches, blockades, and most vitally, the boycott of payment. This has also been a campaign in which people's perspectives on how politics is played out have shifted markedly. In one hand, campaigners hold a plac-

ard, and in the other they might hold a book on Irish economic history, or a document on county council housing allocation procedures, or a text on abortion rights or the struggle against the occupation in Palestine. Once people got active, the scope of their understanding of the world increased, water charges were just the springboard to interest in other struggles, one of the dots to connect with the many others in the fight for a different world.

Political consciousness.

In many community based anti-water charges groups there are left wing activists who hold fairly solid understandings of how capitalism works, and the history of working class struggles around the world. Most of these people will have some experience with pro-choice campaigning, Palestine solidarity campaigning, LGBT rights campaigning, anti-racism campaigning etc., so over time their knowledge and perspectives can come to shape those of other members of the group who may not previously have thought much about those things. This is a positive development but it can be undermined by the strong dislike that people have for the manoeuvrings and often self serving actions of political parties.

International solidarity.

The Detroit Water Brigade visited Ireland at the invitation of the Right2Water campaign in order to stand in solidarity with us and share their own experiences of fighting against the restriction of access to water.

Greek flags became widespread at demonstrations in Dublin to express Ireland's solidarity with the people of Greece as they struggled against the Troika's decision to shut down their economy in response to the election of a left leaning government.

Bolivians attended a recent demo to express their support for our cause as they fought a similar battle for control of their water resources and infrastructure. Actions such as these boost the morale of protesters here by highlighting the global significance of their local actions.

Anti-racism.

Myths about immigrants are widespread among the working class today. They range from stories about how Polish people can get an additional dole payment in order to 'socialise' with Irish people, to how Muslims are somehow the most serious threat to our society. Fantasies such as these are not just factually wrong, they are extremely dangerous. This divisive, right wing narrative fosters an atmosphere of hate that facilitates violence against minority communities and the rise of the far right who ultimately serve the ruling class.

These fictions about other, more vulnerable sections of the working class are part of a time honoured practice of divide and rule. If the ruling class can turn us against each other on the basis of religion, sexuality, race or even employment status, we are easier

to economically exploit. Challenging and countering racist superstitions can only be effective if socialists, anarchists and other anti-racists are active in class struggle within our communities.

If you have campaigned alongside someone for two years, put up posters together in the rain, went door to door for the first time together, leafleted, marched, organised with them, when the topic of immigration comes up you can have a proper conversation about it and challenge any factually incorrect assertions or racist myths directly.

Notably, campaigners can argue from a position of credibility against those who are not politically active who express anti-immigrant or racist views. When some people were expressing the view that 'We should take care of our own first', while actually having shown no interest in Irish homeless people prior to the refugee crisis, the most effective voices countering this narrative were those engaged in feeding the homeless on a daily basis. It's very difficult to argue for helping Irish people in need over foreign people in need when the people helping Irish people are saying that everyone should be helped without delay or exception. Being active in struggles gives credibility and weight to anti-racist arguments.

Networks and campaign structure.

Through this campaign, a nationwide network of campaigners,

"Anarchists look at campaigns like this as an opportunity for working class people to build our own knowledge, confidence, networks, organisational capacities and political consciousness so that no matter who is in government, we will be able to organise to defend ourselves."

socialists, unions and academics is in the process of forming. While community groups form the primary organisational units of the campaign, trade unions (through the Right2Water umbrella group) have acted as the figurehead of the campaign, funding the major national events and engaging in media work nationally and internationally in support of the campaign.

R2W does not direct the activities of local groups which are largely autonomous and self directing. This means the structure of the anti-water charges campaign is totally different from its predecessor, the Campaign Against Home and Water Charges (CAHWT). Arguably, the water charges campaign could not have come into being so rapidly if it wasn't for the CAHWT laying the groundwork for the next phase of struggle.

The CAHWT had a centralised structure set up by left wing political parties and groups which met regularly to coordinate activity and fundraising for the campaign. The formal structures of the group were in place early in the campaign which is totally different from the decentralised campaign that we have built to fight Irish Water.

The current decentralised structure seems to be a lot better for morale as campaigners don't have to endure the constant attempts by rival left wing parties to manipulate the formal structures of the CAHWT for their own electoral ends.

Academics can provide context to a struggle by providing information to campaigners about why water privatisation is being pushed and how transnational capital relates to Irish Water.

Understanding the logic of the market, free trade and neoliberal economic ideology is no longer something that only political anoraks study, it's now what campaigners talk about on the bus to Dublin for a demo.

Direct action.

Irish Water contractors being blockaded from installing water meters was one of the first types of direct action seen in this campaign. This was entirely non-violent and consisted of local communities organising physical blocking tactics so contractors could not install meters on their water mains. This led to the police being deployed to screen contractors from protesters but since we usually came out in large enough numbers, the police were unable to control us and so, frequently resorted to use of violence.

This aspect of the campaign is significant as it shows quite clearly what happens when working class people engage in effective actions to defend their interests. Very quickly police violence is used against us in an attempt to break our resistance.

The media then omits police violence from their reporting and instead implies that the protesters were actually the violent ones. In this struggle, this tactic has mostly failed, as virtually everyone has a smartphone, and so when violence occurs it is plain to see that it is the police, private security and contractors who are the guilty parties.

Through the experience of neoliberal government policy, direct action, police violence and media

lies a significant number of newly politically active people learned rapidly who their enemies are. In a matter of three years, politics in Ireland is in the process of transforming from a spectator sport, into a normal community activity.

Where to from here?

The water charges are just one area in which the state and capital are attempting to squeeze more out of us. Housing is most likely to be one of the major sites of struggle over the coming years as vulture capitalists continue to speculate on and dominate the Irish property market. As homelessness figures continue to rise, and rents remain sky high; we will have to find ways to effectively confront and defeat these forces. As long as we maintain the momentum we've picked up during the battle against Irish Water, we will be in a very good position to get started building a housing movement. A great deal of self education will be needed by our campaign groups if we are to be effective but a number of groups with campaign experience have already begun the process of transforming themselves into housing action groups, as part of the Irish Housing Network.

The most developed groups are based in Dublin but they are sharing their experience with others around the country and are providing advice on how to get set up.

This process will not be complete until Irish Water is defeated but with the boycott holding strong and more people joining it all the time, we appear to be on course to defeat Irish Water.

Build the boycott, build working class power!

Border Crisis: Migration and Europe.

For over a year, the European Union (one of the most prosperous areas on the planet), has been embroiled in a 'crisis of immigration' - the result of failed government responses to increased population inflows coming from the Middle East and Africa.

The hundreds of thousands of migrants attempting to travel to Europe are refused conventional safe entry and are forced to rely on criminal smugglers and dangerous land and sea routes. The predictable result has been a massive humanitarian crisis, concentrated at bottleneck transit points such as the Greek islands, and in sprawling migrant camps within and outside Europe.

Since January this year, every day, eight people on average have drowned in the Aegean Sea alone, on transit between Turkey and Greece. Thousands more are killed on other sea crossings and excruciating cross-country journeys, by disease, exhaustion and exposure in small towns, cities, and in inadequate camps in Europe. Survivors go through hunger and medical deficiency as, often entire families travel with no money, protection, or access to shelter.

Each person travels toward an uncertain future; their hope of fair and decent lives in Europe degrades along with their spirit, with each incident of police brutality, each forced border stop, each night in a freezing wet camp that's likely to be under provisioned, often lacking even basic supplies.

They are herded and controlled like animals by 'state officials' who are granted the right by governments to stop and turn people away, and to employ violence against them should they resist.

In spite of the rhetoric used by the media - who frame this array of needless suffering and death as a "refugee crisis", or "migrant crisis" - it is an issue which is much more reasonably and logically observed as a border crisis. Discussing the problem as a "migrant crisis" does however have the convenient benefit of implying that the sole source of the problem is the migrants themselves. This in effect shifts the burden of responsibility from us, as residents of Europe, onto those suffering and dying in transit – victim blaming.

It also has the important benefit of narrowing the window of follow-on discussion to a conversation, focused not on the existence of borders and the policies enforced by our European governments, but on 'swarms' of for-

eigners attempting to gain access to your country – appealing to that base note of fear and xenophobia, which still permeates our societies.

The responsibility for the ongoing crisis rests unambiguously on the desire of European governments to manage and control the type of person allowed to gain entry into 'their' countries. Governments have claimed the right to police arbitrary, invisible lines on the Earth.

Using the threat of, or real violence against those who attempt to cross without having appealed to their power through bureaucratic channels, European countries overtly discriminate against people based on their nationality, wealth and by default their race and religion.

In the context of an external shock such as the Syrian civil war, where millions of people are forced to abandon their homes in search of new ones, a system of coercive exclusion naturally comes under strain.

The closed border policy then necessitates the employment of

violence against migrants - the result being many thousands of men, women and children, murdered by the determination to keep them out - as well as the suffering of hundreds of thousands, if not millions, who cannot find the legal means to enter, forced to live along roadsides and in dangerous camps in transit.

In order to properly address the misery and death - the humanitarian crisis which now exists on our continent - it is necessary to address the totalitarian nature of the policies governing Europe's borders. An obvious challenge is the question of whether any group of people or institutions possess the right to forcefully exclude fellow humans from venturing onto specific areas of land, for the disadvantage of having come there second?

A second, more practical question is whether we have the right to maintain borders which openly discriminate against the powerless while being easily traversed by those of wealth, of 'good' nationality, or by capital and money - which flows seamlessly across nations to the detriment of working people everywhere?

Finally, do we as Europeans, who in general have profited from economic and military imperialism which has laid the ground for mass immigrations (to the detriment of those outside Europe), have the right to force children onto dangerous dinghies, to force people to live in camps more degrading and brutal than the worst prisons, to imprison and deport humans for crossing borders, and to deny people the right to live in dignity - while we possess such affluence, albeit poorly distributed? To answer, as any decent person would, 'no' to at least some of these questions is to privately challenge Europe's policy of closed borders.

Aside from the moral implications of refusing people the right of safe passage, the governing powers of Europe are now being forced to address the feasibility of such closed border policies.

While governments enjoy maintaining a pretence of total control, it is clear that it is impossible to physically prevent population inflows at the same time as even paying lip service to the ideas of human rights. Europe's Southern coastline is several thousand kilometres long, borders North Africa to its South, and several Middle Eastern countries to its East. An operation actively preventing people from reaching Europe would mean spending billions, employing measures of militarism: navy patrols in the Mediterranean, militarised border construction along Eastern Europe, and the breakdown of the Schengen free travel agreement.

As indicated by Britain's suggestion to cease rescue operations in the Mediterranean, so as 'not to

encourage' prospective migrants - a system of closed borders is an explicit admittance of murder, and a move towards authoritarian state control over all of us.

As it has done in the past, the European Commission is opting for the use of 'soft power' in 'protecting' its populations and policing its borders. This takes the form of political deals with compliant non-European countries, who are enlisted to contain migrants before they can reach the EU, generally in exchange for some small political and/or financial concession.

In recent weeks European countries, including Ireland, have signed off on a deal with the Turkish government designed to cut off a key access point to Europe, between Turkey and Greece.

According to the deal, from March 22nd, all migrants entering the EU from Turkey will be forcibly returned and will be the responsibility of the Turkish state. In exchange, Europe will admit a mere 72,000 Syrian refugees, a small portion of those currently in camps in Turkey - under a 'one for one exchange program'. Officials will take 'bad migrants' arriving in Greece (people not considered refugees by our standards) who have risked the perilous sea crossings and have been subjected to similar brutality, and send them back to Turkey, admitting a 'good migrant' in exchange.

The deal has been widely regarded as a blatant reneging on Europe's obligations under the United Nations Geneva Convention. Literally speaking, the planet's most affluent economic union, with a population of 500 million, is corralling a developing country with extremely dubious/criminal standards of human rights, into accepting the refugee and migrant fallout of failed and collapsing geopolitical arrangements. Human Rights agencies have naturally reacted with outcry.

Colm O'Gorman of Amnesty International Ireland called the deal 'a historic blow to [human] rights' - 'The double-speak this deal is cloaked in fails to hide the EU's dogged determination to turn its back on a global refugee crisis, and wilfully ignore its international obligations' he continued. Emergency humanitarian NGO, Medicins Sans Frontiers, plan to shut down their operations on the Greek islands in response to the deal, refusing to be complicit in plans which it considers 'unfair and inhumane'. In a recent press release, MSF spokesperson Marie Elisabethe Ingres stated: 'We will not allow our assistance to be instrumentalized for a mass expulsion operation, and we refuse to be part of a system that has no regard for the humanitarian or protection needs of asylum seekers and migrants.'

Two pertinent points have (unsurprisingly) gone virtually unreported. The first is that this method of outsourcing border policing is not new for Europe; in 2010, before NATO criminally attacked and destroyed Libya's government, the EU had agreed a deal with Muammar Gaddafi for $55million to be paid over three years in exchange for transforming his security forces into de facto border police.

The EU has a similar deal with Morocco, and is currently developing such agreements with Tunisia and Egypt. The second point concerns the implicit compromise embedded in the EU-Turkey deal.

As well as a financial recompense of €3.3 billion and a pledge to (or at least appear to) entertain discussions of Turkish admittance to the EU, Europe is in effect turning a blind eye to the ongoing and mounting crimes of the Turkish state and the ever-increasing authoritarianism of its Prime Minister, Recep Erdoğan.

The crimes of the Turkish government include suppression of media and dissent, support for Islamic fundamentalist groups, and brutal and bloody oppression of Turkish Kurds. As well as

having a history of mass imprisonment and assassination of dissident journalists, just weeks ago on March 4th the Turkish government seized newspaper Zaman Daily, which it accused of aiding 'the establishment of a parallel state'.

Zaman, a supporter of the Turkish government had become mildly critical of ruling 'Justice and Development Party' (AKP), after the party closed an internal investigation into charges of corruption against leader and Prime Minister Erdoğan. To discuss the history of Turkey's ongoing crimes against the Kurds would warrant a far greater space than can be given here.

Perhaps the most glaring hypocrisy has been Turkey's support for Islamic State and other religious fundamentalist groups in Iraq and Syria. These groups, which grew out of the political instability created by the US led invasion of Iraq, swarmed the

relatively moderate rebel forces during the initial uprising against Syria's president Bashar Al-Assad in 2011.

The ideologies and barbarity of IS and similar groups are notorious. They have attracted extremist fighters from all over the region and from Europe, further fuelling the devastating civil war which has so far killed just under half a million people and displaced around 11 million. About 10% of those displaced have fled to Europe, to be greeted with horror in what is so absurdly and egocentrically dubbed 'Europe's migrant crisis'.

The failure of our governments to meet the minimum standards of human rights for migrants, and the duplicity with which they shirk these responsibilities should come as little surprise. State structures are founded on force and oppression, and are responsive almost exclusively to the wishes of the highly privileged classes.

With this in mind the fallacy behind the argument that 'we should look after our own first' - the belief that we should first help Irish poor and homeless before considering the plight of migrants - becomes obvious. Migrants and poor Irish are victims of oppression by the same system. By making an arbitrary division we are weakening our argument and giving space to a voice of nationalism and racism: people who are more 'Irish' are more worthy of our solidarity.

Many Irish and other Europeans continue to organise solidarity campaigns with migrants and refugees, pushing the reality of closed border systems into public conversation, organising aid convoys and projects for people trapped in migrant camps in Europe, and fighting against the horrific program of Direct Provision at home, here in Ireland.

The below text is the result of se-

ries of questions we put to Cork Refugee Solidarity Activist, Bairbre Flood about her experiences and impressions working with migrants in Europe.

Reports of the border crisis and its victims seem to grow more shocking daily. How do you feel we as activists can begin to engage with the problems in society, particularly to problems of systemic violence against human populations such as refugees?

When you read news reports of bombings in Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria, or accounts of government violence in Darfur and Eritrea, or poverty in Nigeria and Pakistan, it's easy to intellectualise it. To not feel it.

The formal platforms through which new ideas are presented to us, the education system and the media, are designed mainly to ensure detachment and to disempower personal inquisition and creative personal growth. What we must do is begin to educate ourselves, and each other on things like Syria and barbaric immigration policies, but also on things like the war in Darfur which left half a million people dead, yet which our media feels no onus to bring into public discussion.

An enlightened empowered public would be aware that much of the material wealth that creates such comfort in our daily lives, comes directly from circumstances in which people work sweatshop hours and conditions - or of the ongoing British arms trade (who according to their own government figures, exported over £27 billion of military equipment in the past five years alone).

And not to forget the systemic

unequal set-up of a world where trade laws and spurious debt repayments favour the already rich countries and see the poor getting poorer.

How has your first-hand experience in activism shaped your feelings?
To meet the people directly impacted by the worst aspects of our system is truly enlightening. I can still see the Kurdish family with the little boy and hear their story of bombs, terror and flight.

A part of all of us who went to Calais remains in those tents. As a human being I can't pretend I don't know what's happening in our system - because of our system.

As activists it's important for us to talk directly to those fleeing persecution (economic or political), directly to those who are oppressed; we need to develop a bond of solidarity and respect, and have it manifest itself in practical ways. By expressing solidarity among ourselves we unite in the face of real entrenched power. A fantastic example of tangible solidarity is the heroic work which many grassroots organisations are carrying out on the ground in the camps in France, Greece, and Eastern Europe. In Calais there are several grassroots efforts distributing basic aid, clothes and shelter, advising people of their rights as migrants, and offering protection to unprotected minors. In Greece, grassroots groups have been working on the islands as first point of call for people crossing from Turkey.

Has any insight or event left a particular impression?
The way in which those seeking refuge have managed to cross

borders and survive conditions of neglect, detention, police brutality, cold and hunger. It is a real testament to their fortitude.

Seeing the many houses, restaurants, community centres and places of worship which are now being bulldozed in Calais camp were constructed with huge imagination and perseverance. And the bonds of family and community which they maintain in the face of racist attacks by far-right groups, tear-gassing by the police and general antipathy from the mainstream media speak of an all-mighty resilience.
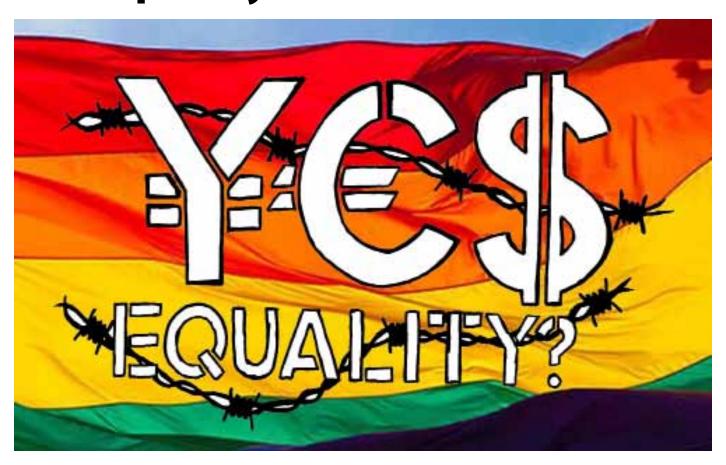
Looking at the issue of migration and racism in Ireland in the future, what do you have to say?

Our convoy last October had a clear objective of 'justice, not charity,' when we were setting out. Bringing practical help to our brothers and sisters stuck in the Calais limbo is only part of the picture. 'What's it like in Ireland,' they'd ask us, 'maybe we'd be welcome there?' We had to tell them about direct provision and the very real chance that they'd be held in a detention centre for ten years without being allowed to work on twenty quid a week. And the sword of deportation hanging over their heads for all that time. The chance of our birth place determines so much of how our lives can be lived.

"You have to dare to look reality in the face and take a whack at some of the long-standing privileges. So long-standing in fact that they seem to have become normal, unquestionable.'
- Thomas Sankara

Yes Equality?

We don't understand words as simply words on their own, entirely dependent on their definition, as one word can have many different meanings. Context plays a big part in our understanding of words. There are some words that leave context with the responsibility of our understanding of what has just been said. The word "buckle", for example, can either mean "to connect" or "to collapse", two meanings opposite to each other, leaving us in need of context in order to understand the usage of the word.

The mainstream voices in our society would lead you to believe that last May we voted for equality. Going by the definition of "equality" alone, without any context, one would believe that we voted in favour of everyone being equal, no one worth more or deserving of less than anyone else, all of us with the same status in society.

In reality, this did not happen, not by a long shot. After the votes were counted and the Yes side won, equality did not sweep across Ireland. Class society was not abolished., Tthe 8th amendment was not repealed., Wwhite supremacy was not eradicated. Tand those on the lowest rung of society were not suddenly placed on an even keel with the privileged minority.

When we add the context we see that this vote for "equality" was in regards to marriage. The right of a man and a woman to enter into the tradition of marriage was extended to LGB+ couples. That is what equality meant in this context.

It did not take long for the façade of "equality" to crumble away. The slogan of "Yes Equality" was replaced with "We Need To Look After Our Own First" when the refugee crisis was intensely brought to our attention in September last year through the tragic image of 3-year-old Aylan Kurdi's dead body on a Turkish shore.

The Irish have a long history of fleeing destitution on this island in search of a better life elsewhere. We have songs, poetry, and folklore to remind us that hardship once drove us from our homes to foreign lands - that is if we survived the journey unlike the many who fell victim to the coffin ships. Yet in spite of this we treat those who come to us in need of the very thing that our ancestors searched for with contempt and disdain.

Those who somehow make it to Ireland are placed into the system of Direct Provision. Within Direct Provision adults are given an al-

lowance of €19.10 a week with an added €9.60 for every child they have. This meagre allowance is all they have to buy food, clothes, cleaning products, and everything else that human beingsone needs in order to survive, and they are deniedhis is without the right to work.

To top off our world famous Irish hospitality, refugees must live in cramped, overcrowded accommodation with no control over where this will be and without the right to rent somewhere else. Some have been kept in this system and in these conditions for up to ten years. While Ireland committed to placing 4,000 Syrian refugees into this system a number of months ago we have thus far taken in 10.

For queer asylum seekers who have been locked out of Irish society at every turn - alongside their straight counterparts - "Yes Equality" was not for them, and it did nothing to help them in their circumstances, (not that our racist laws permitted them to cast a vote anyway).

Last October, "We Need To Look After Our Own First" was edited to "We Need To Look After Our Own - Except Travellers" when a fire broke out at a holding site for Travellers in Carrickmines. The fire claimed the lives of ten people, five of whom were children as well as the homes of 15 people, the very people who should fall under the category of "Our Own".

Yet when those 15 people were being re-located to a temporary site the entrance to the new location was blocked by local residentces, further exposing how shallow our notion of "Yes Equality" was. The usual bigotry was thrown around "You don't have to live next to them, you don't understand". This clearly exemplifiesd that despite the fact that 60% of us had voted for "equality" Ireland very clearly remains a terribly unequal state with no understanding of what true equality means. This may have something to do with the fact that "equality", within or without the context of marriage, had nothing to do with the equality referendumvote.

The vote was about validating the idea that queer people can be just like the normal, traditional family that fills our TV screens. They can meet someone that they care for and enter into a monogamous committed relationship that can lead to a piece of paper that grants the couple access to certain state benefits and privileges and maybe even somewhere along the way, or indeed after the piece of paper is obtained, they can have a child or two running about the place.

Historically, marriage was designed as a patriarchal tool to trap women; to trap them financially and sexually as well as to lock them into their social position. Within it, women have suffered, and still to this day continue to suffer, both physical and mental abuse, rape and even murder at the hands of a husband. The economic side of marriage has been and continues to be instrumental in concentrating wealth, power, and privilege into familial ties.

The authoritarian nature of marriage as well as the power dynamic that it creates between man and wife has been fundamental to the shaping of society through the nuclear family. The nuclear family is a family that consists of two (typically married) people (who are generally of the opposite sex) and their children.

The nuclear family is considered by feminists to be the basis of all authoritarian structure with its structure being used as a model for society's pecking order. The father would be seen as the leader of the family, with his work typically being waged and outside of the home. The mother would be seen as the family's servant, with her work typically occurring within the home and without a wage. Any sons would be treated like miniature family leaders and

daughters as if they were in training for future servitude.

The tone within the home goes something along the lines of "obey your father", "listen to your father", "wait 'til your father gets home then you'll be sorry", "wait until your father hears about this". The lesson that the child is learning is to obey and to kneel to authority.

When this setting occurs within the home, the child is being socialised to obey and respect authority, and to accept a pecking order and to understand it as something that is normal and natural; that some are naturally of a higher social level than others and consequently some are of a lower level. This structure is invaluable to our bosses and politicians in keeping us docile and content with our lot.

Of course, nowadays, marriage has adapted to the change of shape that our society has taken. Women are no longer the property of their husband and can no longer be raped with impunity. While housework still remains unwaged and is not considered a valid form of labour, women do generally seek employment outside of the home, while continuing to labour inside the home.

Fragments of traditional marriage, however, still remain. Marriage is still "an economic arrangement, an insurance pact" (Goldman) which brings with it its own benefits and privileges. We voted for queer couples to gain access to these state benefits and privileges.

Those queers who will enter into marriage will do so with an air of "love is love" and "we are just like your family" – notions that can have an adverse effect onto us queers who do not mirror our heterosexual counterparts; those of us who do deviate from the norm.

Instead of truly fighting homophobia and heteronormativity (the idea that it is normal to be heterosexual and anything else is abnormal) mainstream LGBT society surrendered to the norm and organised around a phenomenon that is not so radical; something that would be respectable and acceptable to those who ten years ago would have been shrieking in horror at the very thought of a Gay Pride parade.

Of course, there are those who marry in order to remain in their spouse's country of origin, this leads to the question of whether or not refugees have to enter into a same-sex marriage before we accept them here in Ireland? Is that what it takes to get a chunk of this "Yes Equality" pie? What would have looked much more like "Yes Equality" would have been destroying the borders, and the nationalist laws that prevent open access from country to country.

The Yes vote brought with it excitement and emotions. Tears of happiness soaked the faces of those old enough to remember darker and more homophobic times. The majority of society told us that they accepted us; but no matter how many rainbows you dress society up in, we still live in a straight society.

Why didn't we strive to destroy the straight society; to create a new society based on our own desires for freedom, solidarity, love and equality, as its defini-

tion knows it?. We have accepted queer acceptance in a straight society, the very same society that forced us to go door-to-door begging for something that our straight counterparts do not even need to consider – are we really content with our lot?

The same door that was slammed in our facesplace by the society that Catholic Ireland created was slammed in the faces of refugees – has rainbow flavoured neo-liberalism stripped us of our compassion?

It's "Yes Equality To All" or it's "Yes Equality To None" – the decision is ours.

Domination, Capitalism, and Economic Crises.

The history of capitalism has been a history domination; of landowners' domination over tenants, of bosses' domination over workers, of economically robust countries' domination over developing economies. of bloody labour struggles, social struggles, and of many crises, which have the most devastating effect on the working class, those furthest away from the levers of power and influence.

As the framework of capitalism has developed, its systems have expanded in complexity, but paradoxically also in fragility.

As Marx discussed, crises which litter capitalism's history were often the result of contradictions in the internal logic of capitalism. The crash of 2008 and the ensuing economic meltdown was such a crisis.

The crash of 2008 was a moment of immense significance in the history of capitalism.[1] Over the course of a few months $40 trillion worth of equity (around 18% of global GDP) had evaporated.

In the US alone $14 trillion of household wealth disappeared, along with 700,000 jobs a month. GDP growth ground to a halt as the global economy plunged into the depths of the great recession, unparalleled by anything since the crash of 1929.

As the stock markets in New York, London, Paris, Frankfurt, Moscow, Beijing and Tokyo all recorded record losses, the giant banks, hedge funds and insurance corporations of the financial industry gradually revealed their exposure and the likelihood of their imminent collapse.

By way of response, US and EU

government officials, comprising mainly of staunch neoliberals ('free-market' ideologues who proudly touted rhetoric of minimal government interference in the market place) went on a tax-funded spending spree of mass nationalisations and bank guarantees, unprecedented in recent history.

While these points provide a glimpse of the systemic collapse that was capitalism hitting the self-destruct button in 2008, they fail to fully capture the scale, complexities, or significance of the event, or of the aftermath in which we remain.

This article briefly outlines the immediate causes of the 2008 Financial Crisis - the trigger of the Global Economic Crisis, which still very much plagues the global economy today.

Of more interest however, we look at how the conditions which precipitated the financial and economic crises were the result of the engineering of imbalanced geopolitical economic systems, designed and implemented by the United States and its international institutions, for the purpose of geopolitical hegemony and effective domination of the capitalist world.
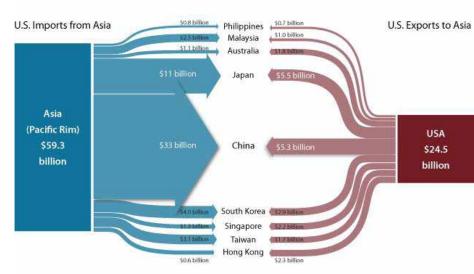
The Financial Crisis in Brief

Speculators may do no harm as bubbles on a steady stream of enterprise. But the position is serious when enterprise becomes a bubble on a whirlpool of speculation. When capital development becomes a by-product of the activities of a casino, the job is likely to be ill-done. - John Maynard Keynes, 1936.

Since the 1970s the political response to downturns in economic growth has been a simple one. Money. By reducing interest rates, Central Banks can reduce the 'cost' for businesses (investors) of acquiring capital, in effect pouring money into the beleaguered market. The increased liquidity causes an upsurge in confidence, hence demand, and the recessionary feedback of falling demand = falling output/redundancies = falling demand can be happily avoided.

Overuse of this policy however creates an abundance of money, flowing around the markets looking for the most profitable investment, which often (usually) is in speculative finance - an enterprise which produces nothing, except profit.

In the early 2000s in response to the economic shocks following 9/11 and the bursting of the dotcom bubble (a speculative bub-

Trade in Goods and Services September 2008

U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, U.S. International Trade in Goods and Services, Exhibit 14, Exports, Imports, and Balance of Goods By Selected Countries and Areas–2008

ble which inflated the shares of internet based companies), the US federal reserve held interest rates at a ground level 1%.

The result was an abundance of cash which predatory banks put to use in the fuelling of major bubbles in the US mortgage and credit markets. In Ireland and peripheral Europe, swathes of cheap money (a result of currency union) flowing from central Europe in search of higher returns similarly fuelled bubbles in credit and real estate.

In the US what was developed was called the 'subprime mortgage market'. Loans were given to 'subprime borrowers' – people on low incomes who had poor creditworthiness, often with no collateral. False assurances and propaganda from the banks convinced people of the wisdom of taking out mortgages to buy houses they couldn't afford at artificially inflated prices.

One might fairly ask, what lender would possibly find it advantageous to give money to somebody with poor credit, to buy an inflated asset which will probably have collapsed in value by the

time the borrower fails to repay?

This is where the magic of financial ingenuity, and financial deregulation allow predatory capitalism to enter full flight in its departure from reason and self-preservation. In the early 2000s, after rounds of financial deregulation under Clinton, bright minds in finance were busy developing new economic models, and financial instruments which would allow them to eliminate risk from the system of money lending; or so they believed.

They created financial instruments called 'Collateralised Debt Obligations' - CDOs - tradable debt assets made up of snippets of loans from a variety of borrowers, with varying credit-worthiness. In a traditional loan, the value of the debt (asset) created is directly commensurate to the borrower's ability to repay.

However given that CDOs were made up of many loans from many borrowers, the belief was that if one person defaulted on their debt, this would not affect another person's ability to repay. In effect the buyer of a CDO hedged their risk, and could

expect close to full repayment along with receiving the usurious interest rates chargeable only to the most underprivileged and vulnerable people in society.

What took place was the mass creation of CDOs across the financial industry, supposedly riskless assets which were extremely lucrative. Of course in reality the CDOs were comprised substantially of subprime mortgages, and hence were extremely high risk.

Yet due to the fact that the regulatory agencies are in essence employees of the financial industry, and that people actually believed that risk could be engineered away, CDOs were given the highest possible credit rating, AAA – treated as indistinguishable in risk from US Treasury Bills, or indeed cash. As a result, banks and hedge funds around the world began stuffing their coffers with these lucrative CDOs, introducing massive risk and vulnerability into the financial system.

When the residential property bubble inevitably burst, the financial crisis began to unfold. Once a few people began defaulting on their mortgages, economic slowdown turned it into an avalanche.

The value of a given CDO became indeterminable. Banks were forced to reveal that much (in some cases all) of the reserves that underpinned the solvency of their business were in the form of CDOs which were now in effect worthless. One by one they were forced to reveal their exposure, organise their own buyouts and/or go to their respective governments to receive bailouts.

Panic set in to the financial sector, and banks ceased lending to

one another, for fear that they would be lending to a moribund business. This credit crunch had the effect of bringing the woes of the financial sphere into the real economy, which came to a grinding halt.

Actual productive businesses, which relied on short-term credit, were left bereft of liquidity and were forced to close. Falling demand inspired dread and fear of what was to come, and investment dried up, thus beginning the shutdown of the productive economy - the great recession.

The Broader Context

While the Financial Crisis of 2008 was devastating in its effect on wages and employment, and exacerbated by the equally destructive government policies of austerity pursued across Europe, it does not explain the current global economic stagnation, high debt and high inequality which pervades. More fundamentally, the financial crisis was a consequence of shifts in the geopolitical economic system of international trade and credit flows; the rules of which were laid down by the United States. The current economic no-man's-land is the result of a discontinuity in this system of surplus production and absorption (current global capitalism) which has broken down.

Of Surpluses and Deficits

Areas of high economic activity are areas that produce excess economic value – marketable goods or services (surplus). Economic activity tends to be geographically focused in certain locations – Dublin in Ireland, New York or Silicon Valley in the US, the Rhine Industrial Zone in Europe.

These areas produce more goods (or goods of higher market value) than their inhabitants can consume, they are therefore producing surplus. By exporting this surplus to less economically active regions, they attract the profit and capital necessary to keep their industries burgeoning, generally keeping high employment and higher living standards.

While surplus areas, or economic centres, are more developed and affluent and are therefore more politically powerful than their deficit counterparts – the source of their wealth and power comes from the demand for the goods they produce coming from deficit areas. This means the strength of the surplus generating economic centres is directly contingent on the demand (economic health) of the peripheral deficit areas.

Thus we can view operating economies as circuits between regions of excess production exporting to regions of excess demand. Under market economics, we must consider, each transfer of economic goods from a surplus area to a deficit must be matched by a transfer of money of equal value in the opposite direction.

As a result what develops is a pattern of trade wherein goods flow from the centres to the peripheries and money flows from the peripheries to the centres. The effect of this natural imbalance between more and less productive regions is a build-up of debt on the part of the deficit region (a trade deficit). This grants the surplus area economic and political leverage over the deficit area due to its effective indebtedness.

This economic relationship lies at the heart of geopolitics, hegemony, and imperialism – however, crucially – is by its nature one sided and therefore unsustainable i.e. if a deficit region remains indebted to a surplus region indefinitely (as is usually the case), it cannot continue buying the productive wares being produced in the surplus region without some form of redistribution.

This creates an interesting yet deadly dynamic, which in effect is the cause of the undoing of the current economic system. As a surplus area you by definition are more powerful than less prosperous deficit areas; their dependence on the economic goods you produce grants you immediate political leverage.

However ultimately the source of your power is the deficit area's demand for your goods, without which your economy fades. Therefore you are in a fixed state of unequal interdependence, which if you abuse – by disallowing the redistribution of wealth from the surplus region to the deficit, outside of a market transaction (allowing the trade deficit to grow indefinitely), you choke off the demand of the deficit region, destroying the system whole.

In the aftermath of World War II, the United States found itself in a position of major geopolitical advantage. Having emerged from the war as the only creditor nation (excepting Switzerland), its major industrial rivals of Germany, Japan, Britain, and the USSR were all either occupied or devastated by fighting.

The Great Depression which had mired US industry in a state of low profit, low production and high unemployment in the decade previous, had been defeated by massive state investment. It was in this context that the 'New Dealers' (US politicians and planners associated with Keynesian economics and the presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt) set about planning and rebuilding the global economy, placing itself at the centre, in a position of unchallengeable dominance.

In July of 1944, 730 international delegates from the capitalist industrialised world met in the small town of Bretton Woods, New Hampshire. The order of the day was to develop a global monetary order and the necessary institutions that would support it. Two of the three institutions which were formed still occupy preeminent roles in the current economic system – the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank. The third was the Bretton Woods fixed exchange currency system. Under this system countries agreed to peg their currencies at a fixed exchange rate to the dollar, the dollar was pegged to gold – convertible at $35 per ounce.

The reason this fixed exchange rate principle is important is because of the relationship between surplus and deficit regions discussed earlier. If two countries develop a one way transfer of economic goods (from surplus to

deficit), the flow can be combatted by a devaluation in the deficit region's currency.

From the perspective of consumers in the deficit region, the devaluation will cause the price of imports from the surplus region to increase, making domestically produced wares more attractive. Concomitantly consumers in the surplus area will perceive a price fall in goods produced in the deficit region, stemming or perhaps reversing the flow of trade.

Under Bretton Woods, currency devaluation was expressly prohibited, setting in stone the relationship of one way flows of wealth, wherein deficit countries would be dependent on the benevolence on the US for economic survival.

The second and arguably more ingenious part of the US Bretton Woods plan was the decision to invest heavily in the infrastructure of its defeated enemies, Germany and Japan. The idea was to create friendly, subservient capitalist surplus areas, which would use the export markets of Europe and China to develop themselves as junior hegemons (incidentally containing the communist USSR).

As a result the US insisted on the formation of the European Coal and Steel Community (the precursor to the EU) and the introduction of free trade within Europe. After Mao's Marxist revolution in China, referred to as 'the loss of China' in US policy planning circles, the US began military ventures in Southeast Asia in part to protect Japanese export markets from communist influence.

The plan was remarkably successful. The decades that fol-

lowed are often referred to as 'the golden era of American capitalism.' The US and global economies boomed as the system of US generated surpluses, sold to Germany and Japan strengthened the US industrial manufacturing base. Equally the exports of Germany and Japan found respective markets.

As the German and Japanese economies continued to grow however, and as their industrial sophistication and output began to rival and trump that of the US, America's status as primary surplus producer nation waned. American dominance over the global economic system seemed to be drawing to a close.

Phase two of American Hegemony.

By the mid to late 1960s the US found itself overextended militarily in the Vietnam war which was costing hundreds of billions of dollars (both through US state spending, and resulting damage to American business output). Domestically, ethnic, gender and class tensions were simmering as an entire generation of young Americans began to see their country for the first time through clearer eyes - as a business governed imperialist.

The military adventurism had caused a steady decline in real wages, and an increase in general prices - as well as hitting profit levels significantly. The political concession to the significant protest and resistance movements that had developed was Lyndon Johnson's 'Great Society' program - a hefty social investment aimed at the rejuvenation of real wages and a reduction in inequality.

The cost of funding these two

expenses (Vietnam War and the 'Great Society') would however have to be placed on the balance books of a declining superpower. The trade flows of US manufacturing to Europe and Asia which had fortified American industry in the decades previous had weakened significantly, reducing its trade surplus to a deficit.

By 1971 the US's liabilities stood at $70 billion, while its gold reserves (under Bretton Woods the dollar theoretically transferrable into gold - giving the currency its value) were only $12 billion. In short the economic position of the US was weakening significantly as the government printed money to fund its programs.

This caused serious tensions internationally; because of the Bretton Woods stipulation that other currencies must remain at a fixed exchange rate to the dollar, US inflation was by default exported to all Bretton Woods countries, who were forced to print more money in order to maintain parity with the devaluing dollar. Even by the end of the 60s it was becoming ever clearer that the Bretton Woods system of fixed exchange rates and gold-dollar convertibility could not be sustained given the changing international economic environment.

Like all power centres, the US looked for ways of maintaining its economic dominance in the face of declining power. By exploiting its 'exorbitant privilege' - the international dependence on the US dollar of which it had sole custody, Nixon and his appointed economist Paul Vockler devised and implemented what was to be the new international economic order.

On August 15th 1971, Richard Nixon abandoned the Bretton Woods currency regime, devaluing the dollar, sending the price of gold and other commodities skyrocketing. The effect of this was to reconstitute American hegemony over the international economic organisation, but this time instead of being a producer surplus nation as it had been after world war two, it would establish dominance by being a net consumer, on which surplus producing countries such as Germany, Japan and China would depend to keep demand for their output, in effect holding the surplus producing countries hostage.

By abusing its position as global currency reserve, the US could and would maintain massive trade and fiscal deficits without being punished with a flight from the dollar. This monumental switch in the flow of capital meant that US consumer needs would now be met by imports bought with debt.

Not surprisingly coincided with the planned degradation of the American labour movement, disempowered by the sharp decline in American manufacturing, and the rise of finance and financialisation as a major component of the economy.

With labour defeated, neoliberals in the halls of politics and behind the desks of government and economics departments waged an ideological and class war on the working class, as well as against developing countries who failed to comply with neoliberal doctrine. The elite have been set free to dominate capitalist society, writing trade deals such as TTIP, C51 and the TPP to enshrine their power - deregulating and wreaking havoc on global finance, with effects on the environment barely an afterthought.

What happens in a system of floating exchange rates (like the one which replaced Bretton Woods) when a country maintains consistent trade deficits? Consider this: one only holds the Singapore dollar if one is interested in buying goods or services originating in Singapore. Demand for the Singapore Dollar (its value) is therefore tied directly to industry and economic activity within Singapore.

If large trade deficits develop between Singapore and other nations, investors fearing a devaluation may exchange to a safer currency, causing a drop in demand, hence depreciation in the value of the Singaporean Dollar. In a floating currency system therefore, market shock absorbers therefore come into play to stem trade imbalances.

Crucially however, the special status of the US Dollar as global reserve currency (it is the currency in which commodities such as oil are priced, and it is used for international trades not involving the US) means that it's value is not just tied to economic activity in the US but to the global economy and global commodity prices. As a convenient offset of this trate, its means is that the US has the capacity to run both enormous trade and fiscal deficits - massive trade deficits in perpetuity. This was exactly the plan when Nixon chose to abandon the Bretton Woods system.

Stable instability?

What the US created, both in the reconstruction of global capitalism in the aftermath of WWII, and through the dissolution of the Bretton Woods agreement, were patterns of international trade which would flow on aggregate in one direction. In both instances this move focused power and geopolitical leverage into the hands of Washington planners and US corporations, as was their intention.

By default however it also created a system which was imbalanced, and therefore unsustainable. What happened in 2008 was the US losing its ability to recycle the surpluses of Europe and China through creating debt on Wall Street.

The amassed surplus wealth, which could not be redistributed to deficit regions outside of the market was recycled in the form of lending – debt creation. The bubbles that grew on the back of this money, helped by financial deregulation grew so large, and inhabited such a large part of the economy, that when they burst the entire system nearly came tumbling down.

The high debt, lack of demand, and obscene levels of inequality which now plague the system as a consequence of these events, also inhibit any potential recovery. It is therefore apt to expect further economic crises in the near future, given the system remains fundamentally unchanged. For now it is running on steroids – massive injections of liquidity and more debt.

An Anarchist Perspective

While a thorough exploration of capitalism and imperialism is necessary in uncovering much of what we see and despise in our current society, the degree to which the nuances and problems

of these systems relate to anarchist theorising is limited.

Because a libertarian socialist, or anarchist society would oppose structures of control and coercion, such as unregulated finance, privately ran business and corporations or state structures, the anarchist perspective (as opposed to a 'left-capitalist' or social democratic perspective) can only provide a fundamental critique of these systems on philosophical grounds.

Still points which are central to anarchist political theory resonate boldly with many aspects of the story just told. Considering the self-destruction of the financial sector: finance is an industry dominated by a small number of privately controlled, hierarchical institutions – corporations. The sole purpose of the corporation is to funnel wealth either produced by its workers, or from society into the hands of its owners.

The creation of lucrative bad debt was the logical consequence of pursuit of profit. The ability of banks, private institutions to create and allocate debt bestows on them stupendous power in society, which is used often against the common good in pursuit of profit.

Internationally, the economic trade flow imbalance could easily have been managed (as was suggested by John M Keynes during the Bretton Woods sumit) through Surplus Recycling Mechanisms and through creating an international reserve currency, which he named the Bancour. This would have democratised to a large degree the running of the economic world order, as opposed to leaving it controlled by the superpower of the day.

Nation states however, existing as concentrations of power will by default seek to dominate and control, leaving the common good or even sustainability as a mere afterthought. In the story of the last century, the abuse of the macroeconomic system to develop political leverage for individual countries, is the primary cause of its demise.

Much of this argument, is made more elegantly in the work of Yanis Varoufakis, Joesph Haveli, and Nicholas Theocarakis. The curious reader should refer to "The Global Minotaur: America Europe and the Future of the Global Economy", and for a more technical exposition "Modern Political Economics". For an insightful analysis of the flaws in mainstream economic thinking, and of the post Bretton Woods America, one should refer to James Galbraith's "The Predator State."

[1] For the purpose of this essay, I will refer to the phenomenon of state backed quasi-market structures and corporate monopoly over production which presently prevails, as capitalism. This is far removed from the conception of 'pure capitalism', which is more impressive as an exercise in calculus than as a proposal for a feasible, sustainable or just system.

What Is Anarchism?

Like almost any political term, 'anarchism' is very broad in scope and covers a huge range of ideas and practice. Instead of trying to give an exhaustive description, or detail everything that is and isn't anarchism, this article will attempt to get to the heart of it, and capture the essence, as far as possible, at the core of anarchism.

Giving a complete definition of such a broad term would take many more words than will fit here and has been done well in other places (e.g. An Anarchist FAQ).

Any short, simple statement trying to define anarchism will necessarily fall short: it will lack nuance, depth, and be open to misinterpretation. However, if a concise defining phrase is what we're seeking then, "favouring co-operation over authority", seems about as complete and accurate as can be captured in just a few words, though it does, of course, leave a huge amount of room for discussion.

Anarchism embodies a kind of skepticism of power and domination in that it assumes that the burden of proof lies with those who wish to exert them. In other words, I don't have to give reasons why I should be free, you have to give reasons (and good ones!) why I shouldn't be. The definition given above naturally splits in two: favouring cooperation and disfavouring authority.

On the pro-cooperation aspect, anarchism proposes alternate (leaderless) models of organisation and concepts for better, more egalitarian organisational mechanisms and structures. On the anti-authority aspect we find analysis of the current system, criticism of its manifestations, exposition of its lies and machinations, and challenges to its institutions through direct action.

There are many myths and misconceptions about anarchism and, though this will not be an exhaustive list, it seems useful to address a couple of the more common ones. The first is that anarchy equals chaos and no rules, and anarchists are those who want chaos (or bomb-throwing mayhem) and a society where everyone simply does whatever they feel like all the time.

There may very well be some people who wish for this, but no one can seriously expect to be able to run a complex society this way. However this seems to be the definition most often upheld by the mainstream.

Beyond simple misunderstand-

ings of the term, the most common criticism of anarchism is that it is utopian and therefore unrealistic. That it requires that all ill intentions cease in the absence of repressive force, and everyone becomes something like a perfect being.

Anarchism makes no promises of such an idealistic world to come, only one to strive for - and this it surely has in common with most any other ideology. Dictionaries tend to define anarchism in terms of its opposition to governments, but this is really something that comes out of anarchism rather than being a defining feature.

The fundamental question underlying any political philosophy is: what values or ideals do we wish to promote and emphasise, and which ones will we devalue and de-emphasise? In the state-capitalist world in which we live, one of the main values that underpins the political system is authority - the right for someone to have control over others' actions.

Some people are in charge of others and make decisions for them, or on their behalf. We are expected to (for the most part) obey those who are in charge of us, and be obeyed by those we are in charge of. This is how most of society's organisations are arranged, there is a hierarchy of authority from the 'ordinary' members or workers, up through some sort of management structure to a single person and/or small committee at the top (board of directors, council, etc).

The main value that's sacrificed under this system is freedom. The freedom for people to decide for themselves - or even, in many cases, have any input into deci-sions that affect them - is ceded to managers or, within the electoral system, 'representatives'.

What we're supposed to gain from this sacrifice is order, and a well functioning system. This rests on the assumption that outside of authoritative systems order is impossible. History has tested this assumption many times and has found it wanting: the Paris commune, the Spanish Revolution, the Limerick Soviet. These are just some examples of events in history in which communities decided to favour the value of freedom over authority and oppression.

Devaluing authority as an ideal doesn't mean we eliminate it completely. This would be undesirable, and surely impossible. One can think of many examples where authority is not only favourable but essential. For example, if we see a toddler about to run out on the road into oncoming traffic, we would exercise authority over the child in order to physically prevent them from doing so. Instead of seeking to abolish authority, anarchism prescribes that authority requires justification.

Strong justification. This justification is primarily owed to those over whom authority is to be wielded, If I wish to exercise authority over a group of people the best way to justify it would be to get their agreement. This, of course, does not always make sense and is not always possible, as in the example above - we do not stop to get the child's permission before we prevent them from running into traffic.

Authoritarianism and anti-authoritarianism are both strong values that seem to develop natu-rally within all us of from the time we are children. We are resistant to authority ("You're not the boss of me!") and at the same time we exercise authority over those smaller/weaker than us - a child might take a toy from a smaller, younger sibling.

The notion that authority requires justification is also an early development. If asked why did you take the toy, the child generally doesn't simply say, "I'm bigger and stronger and I wanted it." Instead we're more likely to hear justifications like, "Well they weren't using it anyway" or "I had it first." It's much easier for someone wielding authority to justify it to themselves than to the subject of the authority.

Of course the younger sibling in the example is unlikely to accept or agree with the justifications and would, if they could, resist the imposition of authority and keep the toy in question.

So what this example also points to is the fact that authority doesn't exist on its own, and cannot uphold itself by its own virtue. Instead it needs to be underpinned by violence, or "might makes right". In the example of the siblings, the older child is essentially backing up their authority with something like an implied threat. They want the toy, they take it, and, since the younger child is physically overmatched, any struggle to retrieve it will likely be met with some force.

Similar implied underlying threats exist within the world's political system(s). The word 'violence' is a rather poorly defined term, and doesn't have a very agreed-upon definition; how it is used in this article in the context of author-

ity is to mean, "something bad will happen to you if you don't obey." It's quite easy to test that this is the case within society, just stop obeying and see what happens. Just to take one example, let's say you decide that you want electricity in your house but you can't (or don't wish to) pay for it. First step is probably to stop paying your electricity bills.

What's likely to happen then is you'll be written to, called on, phoned, texted, emailed, or all of the above, with requests and entreats to pay off the bills. These are likely to then escalate to demands and threats - of being cut off and/or having debt collection agencies employed to retrieve the payment.

Once your electricity is inevitably cut off, if you decide to just reconnect it yourself, you'll then be committing a crime and the electricity company (assuming they find out) may very well press charges. If you keep pushing it far enough, particularly if you are open and forthcoming about what you're up to, eventually people (police) will come to your house and physically remove you and lock you up, and if you resist this part of the process you will be subjected to what most anyone would agree is violence - i.e. battery.

The authoritarian, hierarchical nature of the system inherently makes greater reward available to those further up the hierarchy. The division is extreme currently, with a fraction of a percent of the world's population owning most of the wealth, but the general trend is only to be expected: those in power will naturally pay more attention to their own needs and desires, like most people.

This is at the heart of class division. Class analysis is an extremely complex and in-depth subject and a single paragraph can barely hope to scratch the surface, but, put simply, in a 'democracy', there's a specialised class: the elite, political, or manager class.

These are the responsible, intelligent people (historically, men) who presume to know what's best for everyone and have the role of doing the thinking and planning. The part everyone else is expected to play is to mostly be spectators, and occasionally to turn out to the voting booths to choose between one or another member of the specialised class to be a leader (these days usually called a representative).

The underlying framework of this system has changed very little, if at all, since early civilisation. The ostensible leaders (even in dictatorships) rule only as long as they have the support of those with real power - the wealthy elites who own society. In older times, merchants and manufacturers; these days, CEOs, hedge-fund managers and such. What has changed is how power is imposed upon the masses.

Thanks to labour organising and other large-scale mass direct action, the amount of freedom available to the public in western societies has increased dramatically and the oppression, and degree to which those in power are able to resort to violence, has decreased (particularly if you're of the 'right' colour, creed, nationality, gender, etc). It was becoming easier for people to organise collectively and effect positive changes in public policy. No longer could the people simply

be beaten down.

The ability for people to achieve societal, system change is a serious threat to the established order: most people would like the world to be more fair, which necessitates the rich and powerful become less rich and powerful. Naturally this is something they're against: to oppressors, fairness and equality feel like oppression.

As totalitarian states grudgingly gave way to 'democracies', propaganda took over from the bludgeon as the main tool for controlling populations and set itself to the task of diverting people away from organising and participating in politics, and of promoting values that serve the interests of power.

This tendency is visible right up through all the major institutions of society beginning with the family unit and the education system. Schools tend to instill values like obedience and competitiveness and individual achievement, and discourage values like dissent, challenging authority and mutual cooperation.

The public relations industry is by now a massive, multi-billion euro enterprise, the main function of which is influencing and controlling the public mind. Spectator sports, tv shows, advertisements, movies, and the like, all serve to divert and distract people's attention from the ills of society, while building up power-serving values.

Those who succeed or 'make it' in this system will tend to be those who have had the required values successfully instilled in them. And those who reject these val-

ues will tend to be ostracised or marginalised by society's institutions.

A tiny minority of the population have had their hands on the reins of the system, shaping and designing it to their ends, while at the same time trying their best to hide this from the masses.

International investment agreements are negotiated in secret; neoliberal capitalist organisations have almost no answerability to the public, just to their shareholders (the majority of whom are other members of the wealthy elite); and governments plead national security whenever they can, and employ other instruments in order to hide what they're up to.

The level of secrecy in place is a good indicator both of the extent of public opposition to the policies, and also of how damaging they are - destroying the environment, and spreading tremendously powerful weapons throughout the world, are two examples that come to mind.

This is not a conspiracy of course, it's just how the system works, and what it tends to emphasise. If you're the CEO of a major corporation and you decide to adopt fairer, greener, or more equitable (and, therefore, popular) policies you'll soon find your corporation floundering or, more likely, lose your job.

If you're a politician seeking to implement popular policies you'll be less likely to receive the backing of the business community (which includes, crucially, the media) and most likely find yourself losing out to the candidate who aligns themselves with economic interests.

The state-capitalist system upholds and propagates a lot of dangerous and damaging trends in humanity - economic inequality, resource depletion, environmental destruction, warfare, large scale discrimination and racism, among others. They are opposed by the majority of the world's population, polling data from almost everywhere it's gathered shows this pretty clearly.

The will to end, or at least address, them exists - what seems to be lacking are popular, widespread, interconnected institutions that can challenge the power and domination of the wealthy minority, along with showing alternate, more egalitarian, modes of organisation.

Anarchism holds that these should be institutions of cooperation and mutual aid, worker- and community-controlled enterprises that are well structured but leaderless and without top-down power hierarchies. Human beings have all sorts of natural tendencies: greed and generosity, compassion and animosity, solidarity and individual ambition.

Leadership roles tend to not only attract, but also emphasise the negatives of greed and personal ambition; while leaderless, egalitarian organisations encourage the positives of generosity and solidarity. There are many such organisations in existence: worker owned co-operatives, community groups, and activist collectives are just some examples that come to mind of non-leadership organisations.

Many of these use 'bottom-up' forms of organisation, with members making the decisions and accountable delegates appointed to carry them out. This form of organisation seeks to eliminate (using agreed rules and guidelines) the possibility of a leadership emerging to make decisions 'on behalf of the members' and keep the group under the control of its membership.

Of the problems the power-hierarchy based system has created, there are two that loom particularly large: environmental devastation, which seems poised to eliminate the possibility of decent human existence on the planet; and nuclear weapons, which, either through war or accident (and there have been many close calls on both) could also make our planet all but uninhabitable, but on a much shorter timescale - this is an extremely serious threat that is largely missing from mainstream media and conversation.

These two issues bring a sense of extreme urgency to the anarchist pursuit, an urgency that has been noticeably lacking from the governments and institutions of the state-capitalist system. To the contrary, their responses have been, on the one hand, planning for the further exploitation of natural resources (e.g. Arctic oil and mineral exploration), and, on the other, spending billions upgrading nuclear arms (in contravention of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty). The powerful minority is failing to address these (and many other) issues, that necessarily leaves it up to the rest of us! A common (possibly even the standard) response to the overwhelming complexity and severity of the world's problems, is a kind of passive urban nihilism: the world is screwed, there's nothing I can do as an in-

dividual, might as well just get on as if it's not happening: concentrate on work, or raising my family, or just partying.

This response is perfectly understandable, the problems are much too huge for any one person to attempt to address. But we should keep in mind that those most responsible, the rich and powerful, would barely fill the average town hall.

They are organised, active and engaged, and they command massive military and police force, but their numbers are small and their grip on power tenuous - and they are well aware of this, hence the massive propaganda enterprise and military spending. However understandable this passive despair reaction is, it has the function of supporting the continuation of the power division, since it tends to isolate and demotivate people so they don't pay attention to what their leaders are up to.

And even if our world is beyond the point of saving why should we not live together as well as we can for as long as we can? We need to get ourselves organised and figure out what we want to do about our problems and how we want to live together.

Anarchist organising is something almost everyone is familiar with, in informal settings. A group of friends on a night out, for example, is usually leaderless, with no one particular person deciding what movie to go see or where the group spends the evening.

What tends to happen is someone makes a suggestion and sees if the others are on board.

If somebody strongly disagrees then perhaps another suggestion will be made, and so on until the group comes to general agreement, also known as consensus.

Such a leaderless group can be thought of as an informal anarchist collective, using informal consensus decision making. In anarchist organising, formal consensus decision making works in much the same way, except the rules/guidelines tend to be codified and agreed upon.

The thrust of anarchist theory and activity is separable into six fairly distinct, though overlapping, areas:

Create. Building the new egalitarian institutions, collectives and enterprises, which are to comprise the massive-scale popular organisation effort that will be required to bring about the society we wish to inhabit.

Transform. Altering existing authority-based institutions and groups into ones with more egalitarian structures.

Advocate. Anarchist advocacy, spreading the theory and practise of anarchism, through writing, lectures, interviews, workshops, etc.

Challenge. Challenging the authority of power-centres of all kinds, seeking good justifications for their authority and, when none are found, seeking to dismantle them. In practise through direct action and in theory through analysing and critiquing aspects and institutions of the current system.

Expose. Seeking out and making public the secrecy, lies, corruption and other machinations of

the system.

Reform. Chipping away at some of the more oppressive aspects of society through the available avenues within the current system.

Whatever kind of world we want to live in, it will not simply be granted to us by our 'masters', we will all need to be involved in the running and decision-making of the communities in which we spend our time. Where we work, live, and socialise there are already businesses, institutions and establishments that decide what these experiences are like. We mostly tend to just accept them as they are because any one of us, as an individual, can have little effect on them. What we need to do is organise amongst ourselves to transform these institutions into egalitarian, inclusive leaderless ones, or to create new ones of our own. Seek out and get involved with such organising groups and, where they don't exist, find like minded people with whom to start them.

If we wish to have a hand in deciding what our world is like, and we wish to leave something behind for future generations, each of us needs to get active and involved.

Further Reading

Alan MacSimóin, Follow the Leader?, 2011, http://struggle.ws/ws93/leader38.html

Edward S Herman & Noam Chomsky, Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media, 1988

An Anarchist FAQ, http://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/the-anarchist-faq-editorial-collective-an-anarchist-faq

Interview: Belfast Co-operatives.

Belfast has seen something of a surge of co-operatively run businesses in recent years as more people are faced with the choice between precarious work and unemployment with meagre dole payments.

Belfast is now home to a taxi co-op, Union Taxis, a cleaning co-op, Belfast Cleaning Society, a co-operatively run café, Lúnasa, and a digital media co-op, The Creative Workers' Co-Op - to name but a few.

We sat down with Clem and Colin, two of the three members of the Creative Workers' Co-Op, and Elena from Lúnasa to get their thoughts on co-ops in Belfast.

Common Threads (CT): Why did you want to start a co-op?

Elena: I had been working for other people for a long time, since I was very young. I've been a union member from the beginning of my working years too. For me, working in a co-op was and is the only moral and ideologically sane alternative.

Clem: I was working in various jobs in the media industry and it was a very unstable and precarious market. The newspaper I was working for closed down. We were working in precarious, zero-hour contract jobs.

Gerard and I were working in jobs that paid very little with very little prospects, he was a photographer I was a graphic designer we put our heads together and said "right will we just open a co-operative?" I was involved with a trade union, the Independant Workers Union, that was very supportive of the idea. We talked about it for quite a bit, we thrashed out the idea. There were a couple of other people who were interested but didn't follow through when it became a project.

CT: How did you start off?

Clem: It was myself and Gerard who initially started off, we sort of grew a wee bit and gained two other members who then, for different reasons went on to differ-

ent jobs, but we very slowly started to build up a base of clients we worked with which were NGOs, Trade Unions, Unity groups, some private companies, but essentially we were just building up a base.

Colin: I worked freelance for two years when I was studying; it was low paid with very few prospects. I came in here one day and asked the guys to do a newsletter when I quickly realised it was a job interview, we went for lunch and they said "Right is this the new member then?" From there we just started getting stuff together to register, to get the bank account set up all that there stuff, all the stuff that we weren't used to doing.We got some advice from the Co-Operative Development Hub and got up and running.

CT: Do you find that the co-op model is becoming more well received as the economic situation continues to worsen?

Clem: Not really, it's a very very small movement across Ireland. One example is the credit union movement, they are essentially co-operatives. They survived the bulwark of the crisis because they weren't speculating on people's money and they're quite autonomous and ingrained in Irish society.

It's a functioning model of co-operation within communities and people don't even think of them as a radical idea but they are very radical in terms of what they do, in terms of gathering a community's money together and loaning it out to those within that community who need it.
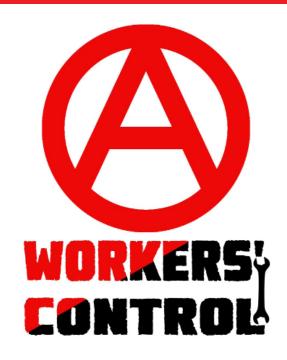
There's probably very few people who haven't had experience with them and it's mostly a positive experience - but outside of that, in your workplace or how you live your life, there isn't much in terms of co-operation.

So you have a credit union movement which is the largest density of co-ops in Ireland but outside of that there was very large agricultural co-ops that were set up in different phases but outside of the financial credit union type things there's a tiny amount of worker co-operatives and most people having lived through a capitalist, individualistic system for so long haven't seized on them mostly because they're very difficult to set up.

A lot of places that do have successful co-operative movements have universities dedicated to teaching people how to co-operate. It may seem counter intuitive but it's a very difficult thing to do, based on a lot of compromises between workers and how they operate and dealing with work on a day to day basis, especially if you have a flat structure.

It's completely different to the management structures of a normal business: in a co-op you're the boss as well, you have the responsibilities that go along with that, it isn't like going to a normal waged job.

Colin: People are used to a certain way of working. People know to talk and communicate with each other to get the job done, but in other jobs you do your bit and then other people do theirs, but in a co-op you need agreement on every step of the way, every part of the job and that means compromise.

In terms of setting it up, there are a few different options but the biggest thing that other people have found is difficulty in getting funding. We've never taken funding which is why we've never had difficulty in it.

But in terms of the state, the government doesn't have a definition of co-ops and doesn't have a structure for it, so you have to decide if you're going to be a company limited by guarantee, a partnership or if you're going to go down the Industrial and Provident Society route and that's as close as you'll possibly get to what a co-op is.

Elena: I definitely think so, but only for those who were already organised activists or had some previous education in these matters.

CT: Among these difficulties what other factors do you have contributing to the difficulty in setting up?

Colin: There used to be recognition for co-ops, the Rochdale Principles were set up years ago, there had been a certain amount of recognition within government - that was removed. In its place we essentially have social enterprises. A social enterprise operates as a business but with some social values, a co-op starts with social and then builds a business on top of that.

Clem: Social enterprises now are kind of like a buzzword, some of them could be doing particularly positive things but still exploiting their workers, it's not one member one vote.

What was previously quite a large co-operative movement in England has sort of shifted towards social enterprise models. Quite a lot of what people would have naturally tended towards, like co-operation, has now been changed under the guise of social enterprises, which are really just businesses.

A lot is made of them but when you go in and look behind the curtain you see that they don't actually produce that much social value and they generally don't

have a democratic workplace. Do they distribute wealth in an equitable manner? Probably and mostly not. Not to knock them, some of them do a lot of good within communities, it's just a shame they don't go further.

Elena: The human factor aka slave mentality. We are not used to running our work life, we are not used to directing ourselves. I think that is a massively important factor in terms of obstacles.

CT: *What role do you think co-ops have to play in creating an alternative society?*

Elena: Right now, we are fun, weird anecdotes. We should be the norm. It's only through self organising that we are going to gain anything, starting by some dignity.
Clem: Co-operatives are not a solution to capitalism at this stage. They need a wider array of political activism.

Co-ops are generally, the history of them, a small bubble within wider capitalism, and they can sort of be a band aid to that but they're never a complete solution to it. Co-operatives are in a big and wide arena in a sense, but they're not in themselves a solution to it.

They could foreshadow what a society could look like in an alternative economic model but at this stage it needs a wider reach, I don't think it's gonna be co-ops replacing capitalism.

That said, they are useful, and while they are still a capitalist enterprise they do give you quite an insight into how Capitalism operates and into how to run and operate an economy, your own

small economy. It does make you realise however that you are not free from the constraints of capitalism in any capacity.

Colin: A lot of stuff that we're now doing in our work is stuff that we usually would have volunteered to do and doing it through our day job kind of helps with preventing burn out.

Our workplace is based on a co-op model as well as our own principles which means that we can try to make a positive change through a full-time job.

CT: *After working in a co-op for some time now what are your opinions on bosses and workers' control?*

Elena: My opinion is the same as before. Although this experience is turning out to be even tougher than I expected, my opinion on employers, bosses and management hasn't changed. I still see most of them as conscienceless vultures. I really don't think this behaviour is inherent in the managerial class, I think it is an option; a decision on how to run a group of people and a business that ignores the welfare of workers and puts profit first every single time.
Clem: We don't need them! We don't need bosses, we need workers control

CT: *What do you enjoy most about working in a co-op?*

Colin: There's a purpose to everything we have to do. It's not about doing the next mundane thing just because the boss said to. Every decision, whether you agree with it or not, is made together and is rooted in the collective desire to succeed, not an individual's desire to control.

Elena: The pride and self respect.

CT: *What advice would you give to anyone looking to set up a co-op?*

Colin: Hurry up!

Clem: Stick at it! Go and talk to as many people who have been through that process before, it could help you resolve or avoid a lot of common mistakes that other people have been through before, there's a small network of co-ops in existence

Elena: I would say, get twice the money you think you are going to need. Make sure you know who are you getting in bed with. Be resilient. Take some time off from work. Accept help from others and get professional help if needed (from accounting to electric installation).

Colin: Get in touch with us, give us a shout, one of the principles is co-operation among co-ops!

Notes on organising meetings

Organising requires getting together and making decisions, sharing information and organisational work. It only takes a few informal chats among any group of people before it becomes obvious that some structure is greatly needed in facilitating group functioning. Without structures and procedures people often forget what was agreed, what tasks were to be done and by whom, or when the next meeting is.

People often get frustrated that they never get to have their say, or that meetings go on for ages with no decisions made, not to mention people jumping from one topic to another. Fortunately a long history of activism and anarchist organising has led to the development of methods for dealing with these problems and arranging meetings so that they can be effective.

Whatever meeting process your group agrees on will probably naturally end up being tailored to your particular group. There are no hard and fast rules, just guidelines and suggested roles. One of the most important, that immediately begins to bring order to a group's meetings is a rule that people raise their hands to indicate they wish to contribute, and then speakers are taken in order.

This requires someone to take on the role of facilitator and bring those whose turn it is to speak into the discussion. In meetings of 8 or more people it's very useful to have the queue of speakers' names visible (on a whiteboard or similar) so that everyone knows when their turn is coming and how long they're likely to be waiting.

The facilitator's role is to help the group have a well run and inclusive meeting, encouraging similar levels of input from everyone, keeping the meeting focussed on one item at a time until a decision is reached by the group. The facilitator does not direct the group or make decisions for them, and the role should be rotated through all group members, it is a skill that almost anyone can learn.

At the beginning of a meeting, figuring out what points are to be discussed and writing up the agenda in a prominent place creates a very useful tool. It gives the group a good idea of the scope of the meeting, of how long the meeting is likely to take, and allows the items to be discussed to be ordered in a way that makes sense - usually moving the weightiest, most time consuming items to the end, and trimming some items if it looks like the meeting will run too long.

The facilitator should ensure that the outcome of each agenda item is recorded, this can be done by a separate minute taker, to relieve the facilitator of some of the effort of running the meeting. Each agenda item will probably lead to a decision by the group.

How decisions are made is something that should be explicitly agreed upon by the group, most groups use consensus-based decision making (where all decisions are agreed to, or at least not disagreed with, by all members).

The outcome of each decision should be recorded by the minute-taker, this is quite likely to involve an action (i.e. a task to be carried out by one or more members of the group) and/or an agenda item at a later meeting - if further discussion or a report-back after an action is required.

If meetings tend to run too long, adding a time limit to each agenda item can help meetings to run to schedule. Time limits do not have to be rigidly adhered to but it will help the group to be aware of how long the meeting will take, and decide whether or not to continue on a point if it's likely

to make the meeting run longer.

As agenda items are discussed and dealt with, the facilitator should try to regulate the flow of conversation to ensure roughly equal participation from all members. Quieter members should be encouraged to participate in discussion, with no individual being allowed to dominate and more vocal members asked to hold back.

There are many tools available for aiding with this, the use of hand signals (see end of this article), a conch or talking-stick, if the group is large, breaking it up into smaller discussion groups, using go-arounds (i.e. taking input from everyone in turn) to get each attendee to express their thoughts on a point or issue.

As proposals are made the facilitator should summarize them for the group and make sure everyone agrees with what is proposed. It can be useful to write proposals up where they can be seen by all meeting attendees. If agreement hasn't been reached after a reasonable amount of time and discussion the item may be tabled until the next meeting.

The facilitator should try to keep the meeting moving forward but make sure each item is sufficiently discussed , ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to input, and not mistaking silence for agreement.

Vibe-watching is another important aspect of facilitation. Meetings are necessary for getting things discussed and agreed upon but also for group-maintenance - ensuring everyone feels fully involved and empowered in the group and encouraging solidarity and connection between group members.

Vibe-watch includes keeping an eye on the atmosphere of the meeting, helping the groups deal with conflict and distress, and watching for members being affected. If the group is becoming restless, bored or tired, the facilitator (or vibe-watcher if the role has been assigned to someone else) can call for a break or run a quick energising activity.

After all agenda items have been covered it's common practise to have an AOB section, where people can bring up brief items that either have come up during the meeting or were not thought of in time to make it onto the agenda. Before the meeting ends the date, time and location of the group's next meeting should be decided on, along with who will take on the facilitation role(s).

There are some people who, for one reason or another, do not find they can participate well in meetings, or group settings. If this is the case in your group efforts should be made to ensure they are included in other ways.

Someone attending the meeting can make sure any points or proposals the person would like discussed are brought up at the meeting. They can be given the opportunity to have a say in decisions made at the meeting and can be briefed afterwards, along with having the minutes sent to them.

Meeting facilitation can be difficult and demanding, particularly with large groups (anything upwards of 10 or 12 people). The role of facilitator should be rotated through the group with everyone who feels they can taking turns facilitating. External facilitation training is often a good idea, groups like WSM, Seeds For Change and others are open to providing such training.

Anarchist meeting facilitation can be used effectively with groups of any size, even up to hundreds of attendees. It should be kept in mind that the larger the group the more time will probably be required for each agenda item, and the longer it will take for the group to reach consensus on decisions.

Facilitating a large group is more difficult and the responsibilities can be shared among several members. Some possible roles and the usual duties associated with each are provided below.

Your group may choose to adopt some or all of them, combine some of them, or think of new ones of your own that suit your group. However your group decides to organise your meetings it is most important that each member feels meetings are an effective and useful endeavour.

Roles: Facilitator, Queue Keeper, Time Keeper, Minute Taker, Vibe-Watcher, Attendee
Equipment: Meeting room with seating, heating (if needed), whiteboard(s), markers & wipers, pens + paper and/or laptop

Facilitator
Prepare the agenda before the meeting

Make sure the meeting location is appropriate for all attendees: accessibility, temperature, etc

Send around any pre-meeting

material you have

Explain at the beginning what the meeting is about and how it will run

Do a go-around to have everyone introduce themselves to the group (usually called a check-in)

Have the minutes of the last meeting with you (or get someone else to have them)

Look for agenda items from attendees at the beginning of the meeting

Organise agenda items into an appropriate order

Add a time limit/guideline for each agenda point

Keep the meeting running smoothly and on-agenda and try to keep agenda items to their stated time limits

If non-agenda items come up in discussion they may be added to the agenda, or moved to AOB

Make sure one person at a time speaks (back-and-forths can be ok sometimes but they should be the exception rather than the rule)

Point at and call the name of the person whose turn it is to speak

Discourage people talking out of turn

Encourage people to speak who haven't spoken or have been speaking less than others (or ask more vocal attendees to hold back)

Get the queue keeper to write down all proposals on a white-board

Engage the meeting on said proposals and try to get to consensus

Make sure people feel ready to make a decision on a proposal, they made need some more time

Use go-arounds where appropriate to get discussion flowing

Keep the numbers of direct responses down, 3 per person per discussion is a good rough limit

Ensure the minute taker has noted all decisions and actions and anything else that needs to be noted

At the end of the meeting check to see if the group would like any of the agenda items or decisions revisited at the next meeting

Have a closing go-around (a check-out) to check how the group feels the meeting went, if aims were reached, actions apportioned fairly, and everything discussed thoroughly

Time Keeper
Keep track of the time spent on each agenda item and alert the group, or facilitator, when the time limit allotted to an item is approaching

Negotiate extra time for agenda items or the whole meeting, if necessary

Queue Keeper
Write down the names of people who put their hands up to speak.

Cross/rub out the names of those who have spoken.

If you wish to speak yourself add your name to bottom of the queue.

If someone has a direct response or a technical point and the facilitator hasn't noticed, alert them

Write down any proposals that are announced (can also be performed by the agenda keeper)

Agenda Keeper
Write the agenda items up as they are announced.

Cross/rub out agenda items once discussion has finished.

Write down any proposals that are announced (can also be performed by the queue keeper).

Minute Taker
Write down the start and end time of the meeting.

Take down the names of attendees.

Record action items, proposals, decisions, agenda items for the next meeting, and any other important points such as volunteers or interesting bits of conversation

Minuting everything that's said is very difficult and is probably unnecessary, if this is required, consider recording the meeting, otherwise just write down the topics discussed

After the meeting distribute the minutes to group members

Vibe Watcher
Pay attention to the group dynamics and emotional atmosphere, listening carefully and observing body language.

Intervene, if it seems necessary, in situations of distress or conflict, perhaps suggesting one-on-one time-outs or smaller discussions

Suggest breaks or energising activities where they seem appropriate or required, meetings should be fun and enjoyable where possible

Attendee

Send around any pre-meeting material you have.

Put your hand up when you wish to speak, you will be called upon by the facilitator.

If someone has their hand up but the queue keeper or facilitator hasn't noticed, point at the person.

Similarly, if a proposal is made and neither the facilitator nor the queue keeper have noted it, indicate that you have a technical point and point it out.

Try to self-facilitate as much as possible: if you have been speaking often or for a long time try to let others in ahead of you, if you are called upon to speak but you don't think it's your turn point it out.

Where you feel it is necessary, you can actively participate in facilitation by making a technical point, e.g. when you don't think enough time has been given for discussion of a proposal.

Use the hand signals:
hand up = add me to the queue please
wavy hands pointing upwards = approval
wavy hands pointing downwards = disapproval
wavy hands pointing out from the body = ambivalence or not sure
T-sign = technical point - not related to the discussion but to something ancillary
two hands up (or a finger on each hand) = I wish to jump the queue to give a brief response to something just said

Further Reading

WSM, How to avoid Bad Meetings and hold a Conversation about Anarchism, http://www.wsm.ie/c/avoid-bad-meetings-training-report-back

Seeds For Change, Facilitating Meetings, http://www.seedsfor-change.org.uk/facilitationmeeting

produced by the
Workers Solidarity Movement