

SOCIALIST VOICE

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Social partnership— Can we afford it?

IT appears that the question is not whether the trade union movement will enter negotiations for a new partnership agreement but is one of timing. But before the ICTU enters new talks, some very serious thinking needs to be done.

Over the last two decades the main beneficiaries of “social partnership” have been the better-paid workers. The gap between low-paid workers and those at the top has grown. We now have one of the main civil service unions champing at the bit to enter partnership talks, despite the fact that it has the largest concentration of low-paid workers, who benefited very little from this whole process. They need to be asking themselves some very hard questions.

Another area that needs to be taken cognisance of is the very sharp decline in trade union concentration. This decline will only intensify. Despite the dramatic expansion in the economy, there is growing evidence that the number of employers who refuse to recognise, or who “derecognise,” the right of their employees to join and be represented by a union of choice is growing.

How can you have partnership with someone who constantly either refuses to let you in the door or wants to push you out the door?

These agreements are increasingly seen by tens of thousands of workers as agreements in the main between the Government and its employees, having little relevance for the needs of workers in the private sector. To the few who are organised in unions, and to those who are unable to join one, unions appear not to care, or to be powerless to help them. The bosses are using international bench-marking in the race to the bottom, which we need to resist.

If trade union concentration continues to decline, this

will have a major bearing on a number of areas.

- Union influence will decline.
- Union dues will decline, which will affect the capacity of unions to defend their existing members.
- There will be a sharp contraction in the number of union officials and ancillary staff.
- It will affect the pay and conditions of those employed with the trade union movement, such as the pension funds, etc.
- Existing pension funds may be sustained only with the liquidation of union assets.

How can you have partnership with someone who constantly either refuses to let you in the door or wants to push you out the door?

- The number of unions will be reduced, and so the democracy of the movement will be affected.

There are important areas that need to be addressed by our movement if we are to stop the decline in concentration, to expand, to organise the unorganised, to make the movement more relevant to the nearly two million workers in Ireland,

and to stop the race to the bottom:

- Legislation guaranteeing the right to be represented by a union.
- Repeal of the Industrial Relations Act, particularly those sections that prevent trade unions from effectively representing their members.
- Greater legal protection for workers.
- Increased penalties on employers who flout the laws regarding health and safety.
- Increased penalties on employers who break the Working Time Act or the minimum wage legislation.

“ No matter what the greatest tyrant in the world, the greatest terrorist in the world—George W. Bush—says, we’re here to tell you not hundreds, not thousands but millions of the American people . . . support your revolution. We respect you, admire you, and we are expressing our full solidarity with the Venezuelan people and your revolution.—**Harry Belafonte** (Jamaican-American singer and UNICEF good-will ambassador) in a television broadcast in Venezuela ”

- Forcing employers to adhere to legally binding registered agreements.
- Beefing up the Labour Inspectorate and increasing the number of inspectors, to ensure that all places of employment are visited at least once a quarter.

Trade unions in the near future will face even more challenges to their members, their influence, and their survival. The Services Directive now being steered through the EU Commission by Charlie McCreevy will have a profound impact on Irish workers.

The Nice Treaty is coming home to roost. The ICTU bought a pup when it supported the Government in forcing through the second vote. We now have leading elements within the trade unions and the Labour Party whingeing about this directive, when those who opposed

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it pointed out that this was all going to happen.

Work permits and restrictions on labour are not going to solve our problems. The countries of eastern Europe are now colonies; and there's no point having colonies if you can't exploit them: history shows that. The labour movement needs to learn lessons from the past and not keep repeating the same mistakes.

The case for statutory union recognition

THE issue of union recognition has once again come to the fore in the light of the recent dispute at Irish Ferries, where 543 potentially non-unionised eastern European agency crew will be employed directly in place of the previously employed unionised workers, and what might result in a form of effective de-unionisation.

There has been—as noted in the previous edition of *Socialist Voice*—a general hardening of employers' hostility against unions, displayed most obviously in the Irish Ferries case but also in other recent recognition disputes at Ashford Castle and Ryanair. Non-union Ireland continues to grow, particularly among transnationals and in the small-firms sector—areas where unions are finding it difficult to gain recognition. These difficulties have not been helped by the Constitution of Ireland,

which, while allowing workers to join a union, places no corresponding compulsion on the employer to actually recognise this. The Industrial Relations (Amendment) Act (2001) and Industrial Relations (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act (2004), while providing options for unions that have been refused recognition by employers, do not deal with union recognition but with disputes over improvements in pay or conditions of employment. The legislation, in fact, explicitly excludes arrangements for collective bargaining. It is unlikely, therefore, to improve union access to work-places where the employers are determined to stay non-union and consequently is likely to have minimal influence in reversing the declining union density in the private sector.



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The statutory approach

Issues surrounding recognition should not be underestimated. Recognition is an essential factor in helping unions grow. There is a cause-and-effect dynamic at work here, whereby the more unions gain recognition, the more likely they are to grow.

The Scandinavian model provides a useful example of this. There the union recognition process involves an uncontested and automatic statutory recognition of a worker's right to collective representation by a trade union for collective bargaining. While union density has declined throughout Anglo-Saxon economies in the 1980s and 90s, in the Scandinavian countries, where there is an automatic right to be represented, density has increased or, at worst, registered a negligible decrease. The ease with which Scandinavian unions are recognised seems to have contributed to the maintenance of their high levels of union density.

A slightly different but equally interesting model of statutory procedure exists in Britain under the Employment Relations Act (2000). While this act has its weaknesses, in work-force coverage issues and the time gap between initiating recognition disputes and ballots, the trade unions' evaluation of the procedures has been

generally positive, and surveys carried out by the British TUC have revealed a growth in the number of campaigns to secure recognition as well as a substantial increase in the number of recognition agreements.

The arguments against statutory recognition

There are some, of course, who are legitimately wary of statutory intervention. Historically speaking, there has always been a suspicion of legal interference in industrial relations, with some preferring the so-called “voluntarist” route, whereby unions remain free to regulate the terms of the employment relationship without state interference.

This is essentially a question of the state and who the state serves, which is an important argument, but it also crucially ignores some basic realities. The government (and indeed the European Union), through different legislation, is consistently intervening in regulating the individual and collective aspects of work as things stand—as in health and safety legislation, for instance. It is simply the case that one should not be opposed to state interference *per se*—at least certainly not when such legislation can be supportive of your own side’s interests.

It shouldn’t be a question of intervention or no intervention but of the degree of intervention, in what areas, and for whose interests. A statutory procedure does not impose outcomes on industrial relations in the workplace, because these would still need to be determined by the bargaining power and negotiation skills of the union activists involved. Unions, through representing their workers, still remain free in the voluntarist sense to fight out the terms of employment.

A second criticism of statutory recognition often cites the case of the United States, where, despite statutory

union recognition under the Wagner Act, unions continue to face serious organising difficulties. But a closer examination of the history of the Wagner Act proves otherwise. On its introduction, in 1935, American unions represented only 13 per cent of the non-agricultural work force. In the five years subsequent to the passing of the Wagner Act, which gave American workers the right to organise in trade unions and made it illegal for managements to interfere with that right, union density doubled to 27 per cent and by 1945 reached a peak of 35 per cent. However, the American business class, who were opposed to the act from the outset, pushed, through friends in government, the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947, which, under its “free speech” provision, meant that American employers could actively campaign in union elections and seek to coerce workers away from union membership.

Of course if statutory recognition is lobbied for, we can expect the usual suspects from IBEC, the PDs and the rest of them who will plead, “But what about the transnationals?”—which will allegedly run scared of such statutory intervention. But what about workers’ rights? And if these Intels and Hewlett-Packards have such wonderful employment practices, making unions irrelevant, as is so often claimed, then what have they to worry about in any case?

Ultimately, statutory recognition can work. Scandinavia and Britain are good examples of this. The case of the United States is instructive in so far as it points to the importance of political and institutional support in either aiding or constraining the process. But this is very much a question of the labour movement finding the right friends politically, with the courage and conviction to stand up for workers’ rights. But of course that’s another day’s work!

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More privatisation coming down the track

IN December 2005 the Transport Ministers of the EU member-states met and agreed rules requiring states to begin preparing for the “liberalising” of railways throughout the European Union by 2010.



Over the next four years governments will have to comply with various directives dealing with railways, including Council directive 91/440/EEC. This directive, introduced on 29 July 1991, requires a root-and-branch application of the neo-liberalist model, which will institute what is called a “vertical split”: the separation of the

railway infrastructure from the operation of railway services. It requires, or demands,

- (1) operational autonomy for railway operators,
- (2) under the guise of accountancy purposes, the separation of the infrastructure from service operation,
- (3) open access for cross-border undertakings,
- (4) track access charges, and a “sound financial basis” for railway operators.

What they are attempting to bring about is the application of the model of running a railway network that John Major inflicted on the British railways, with disastrous consequences not alone for the travelling public but in the huge loss of life resulting from little or no investment and from fractured control and supervision. In Britain the Railways Regulation (1992), which began the whole privatisation thrust, was introduced under section 2 (2) of the European Communities Act (1972) in order to comply with directive 91/440/EEC.

We have seen ten years’ experience of this model of running a railway network, the costs of which are clear

for all to see (except for the ideologues of the neo-liberalist kind): the rapid deterioration of tracks and rolling stock, many passengers and railway workers killed or badly injured, state subsidies filling the bank accounts of private train operators, and pay and working conditions constantly under pressure and fares skyrocketing, making Britain's railways the most expensive in Europe.

If we analyse the four criteria outlined, we see they are so wide that they can be interpreted in many ways; but, given the current dominance of privatisation, the following interpretations are not unreasonable.

(1) "Operational autonomy for railway operators"

This will be argued for on the grounds that it will give the management of existing state-run railways more freedom and autonomy and will free them from political control and interference, thereby making them more responsive to market demands through freeing them from political control and interference.

Yes, there is an argument to be made for the management to be made more accountable to the needs of the public, and also to its work force. That should properly be undertaken when there is a long-term investment programme and the management, workers and travelling public know that regular subventions are guaranteed. The management could then plan for infrastructural development, establish investment priorities, and advance towards providing an acceptable public service and an appropriate return.

But neo-liberalists will argue that "operational autonomy" means that the state itself should cease to own, or have any say in, how rail transport should be run. Autonomy can really be achieved only when it is in private hands. The first step along this road will be "operational autonomy," and the second step will be privatisation.

(2) "Separation of infrastructure from service operation"

What the directive demands is that the track network should be operated separately from the trains that run on the tracks. The track company would charge the train company so much for the use of the tracks—somewhat akin to a toll on a motorway. (And experience shows that these tolls continuously increase.) The ultimate aim of "transparent financial accounting" is the situation they have in Britain, where the trains are owned by one company and the tracks are owned by another one.

To separate track and trains seems to imply that if the company that runs the trains can't reach agreement with the company that runs the tracks, they can pick up the trains and go to another set of tracks. Faced with a toll road, you can choose to travel on that road or not; but it is obvious that a train and track have a fixed relationship. This approach would allow the public purse to be constantly raided by robber barons. Subsidies will increase; but the main beneficiaries will be the private operators, both train and track owners.

The priority of private companies is to make profit. Experience has shown that railways require long-term and sustained investment from the public purse. This investment will not be secured from train operators, as they are under the same commercial pressures from their investors as the track companies. It is clear that the real losers will be the public.

(3) "Open access for cross-border undertakings"

This suggests that trains should be able to run through

out the countries of the European Union without hindrance. To bring about this kind of standardisation would require billions in investment. This can, and no doubt will, come from the various member-states; very few private companies or banks are going to take the long-term approach that this will require, or the risks involved.

It is in this context that we need to understand and to be concerned about the massive investment from the public purse that is now under way—and is long overdue—in Iarnród Éireann. This is a vital public asset and needs to be kept in public ownership.

Under this new Rail Directive it will mean that if you own a railway company, for instance in Poland or Latvia, you could run a railway service in France or in Ireland, with Latvian or Polish rates of pay and conditions. And there would be no grounds for anyone objecting or challenging this.

This form of social dumping is already happening in the maritime and road freight industries. The European Union is proposing a "European train drivers' licence," which would lead to the driving down of wages and conditions. We know from the experience of Irish Ferries that wages and conditions are never restructured upwards.

(4) "Track access charges and a sound financial basis for railway operators"

It is possible under this section of the directive that a company could strategically own and control track in a number of adjoining countries. This would give them unprecedented bargaining power and control over the complete network by virtue of their geographical advantage. They would not have a monopoly, but with strategic buying they could turn a minority control into a virtual monopoly. This would allow a private company to determine economic and social development and priorities throughout a great portion of the European Union. Perhaps this is why the German government recently announced that there are no plans at present to privatise the Deutsches Bundesbahn.

The disaster that is rail transport in Britain is a direct result of this "vertical split" model now about to be implemented by the EU Commission and national governments. Naturally it has the backing of the powerful lobby of the employers' group CER.

Irish railway workers need to be aware of what is coming down the track and to alert their unions that they want them to vigorously oppose this directive.

Only an integrated public transport system, incorporating a strategic planning model where the workers and the travelling public have a say in how it is managed and in the priorities it should serve, can create the best means of providing reliable public transport.

● *For a more detailed analysis of the Rail Directive we recommend readers to visit the web site of the People's Movement at www.people.ie.*

And the madness continues

DOCK workers throughout the European Union engaged in a one-day stoppage in protest against the proposed EU Dock Directive on Port Services. This directive would mean that ships' crews would be able to load and unload their own ships. It would do away with thousands of well-paid jobs right across the European Union, including all the Irish ports.

Is there no end to this madness from the European Union?

Spooks, spies, and Special Branch

THE peace process continues to be stalled as both governments attempt to put the pieces back together and get the Executive and Assembly running again. The British Secretary of State, Peter Hain, has stated that he intends cutting off the salary of members of the Assembly if the Executive and Assembly are not operational later this year.

Unionists, in the form of Paisley's DUP, are sitting tight, hoping that events will somehow go away. They continue to make forlorn calls for the SDLP to open up discussions on re-establishing the Executive without the Sinn Féin members. It is a sign of how out of touch they are with the reality of the nationalist community in the North: such a move would be the final nail in the coffin of an already weakened and vulnerable SDLP.



Branch when they claimed the IRA was about to take action against him. This action by the Special Branch could only have been designed to split Republicans and sow maximum suspicion and division within their ranks. It follows on the outing of Freddie Scappaticci as a spy within the IRA leadership.

The outing of Donaldson was quickly followed by more visits to the homes of senior

The UUP under Reg Empey's leadership started off shakily, falling in behind Paisley last summer during the marching season; but he subsequently managed to extricate himself from Paisley, using the violence of the Orange marches to push his agenda.

The IRA wrong-footed all its critics when it finally completed its decommissioning of its weapons; yet we still had no movement from the Unionists or the British. What both the British and the Irish establishment want is the decommissioning of Republican politics, which is far more vital than the weapons.

Just before Christmas three members of Sinn Féin who faced charges of spying on members of the police and prison service as well as Unionist politicians had the charges against them dropped. The raid on the Stormont offices of Sinn Féin was a highly publicised one, with television cameras following every move. All they managed to find was one computer disk. This raid led to the collapse of the Executive and the suspension of the Assembly.

Then we had the bombshell. One of those arrested for spying at Stormont was a British agent who worked for the RUC Special Branch and British military intelligence for nearly three decades and was a senior member of Sinn Féin. Given the evidence that has now emerged, this is little short of a coup d'état by the British state. The overthrowing of democratic institutions by the secret police is breathtaking in its scope and raises profound questions about democracy. It also exposes the fact that the state itself is an active agent in the policies, operating in the interest of powerful economic forces.

Shortly before the dropping of these charges we had the much-publicised raids on the homes of a number of Republicans in the south Down area in connection with the Northern Bank robbery at Christmas 2004.

Denis Donaldson was outed by the PSNI Special

republicans to inform them that their life was in danger from the IRA for spying for the British and the RUC Special Branch. Or maybe it was to tell them their television licence had expired; the damage would be done, the impression given; the result would be the same. Donaldson was now of little value to the Special Branch and was expendable.

The outings would also provide renewed evidence that intelligence-gathering could show that the IRA was still active and armed, so undermining the decommissioning that took place over last summer.

Then the Irish Special Branch got in on the act with clever leaking to the press that a member of the Sinn Féin leadership, Caoimhín Ó Caoláin, worked for them. All this was aimed at sowing maximum confusion and suspicion of the Sinn Féin leadership. Who could be trusted at the top of the Republican movement?

Former members of the Republican movement writing in papers and appearing on radio and television, giving their tuppence-worth, are saying that they knew all along that this or that individual was a spy, speculating that surely there must be more spies at the top and so fuelling the tension and confusion. It is grist to the mill of the British security campaign against Republicans.

Then we had the former Unionist MP John Laird naming people whom he believed to be prominent Sinn Féin and IRA members who are part of some great conspiracy to infiltrate and take over the media in the South. This felon-setter hides behind the privilege of the British House of Lords to leak Special Branch, military intelligence and political police reports. This is all aimed at breaking Republicans and imposing a solution that is in the interests of the British and the Irish establishment.

The whole political process over the last decade was to bring Sinn Féin into the political process, and to emasculate and marginalise it, to confine any political settlement within the Six Counties, with minimal cross-border co-

operation. The SDLP and UUP would be the permanent parties of government.

But if Donaldson's role was to steer Sinn Féin into the political wilderness, as the dissident republicans claim, he did a pretty poor job of it. Throughout all this the republicans have maintained their unity and kept their shape. This has clearly failed as a strategy, and Sinn Féin has grown in political strength, both north and south.

Republicans need to maintain their unity, but they also need to reach out and attempt to get beyond the unionist establishment's grip on the Protestant working class and to address their concerns. It is important to continue to point out that the Catholic-Nationalist community continues to suffer from the decades of unionist misrule; at the same time they need to address the fears, real or otherwise, of working-class Protestant communities who feel they have not got and are not getting a fair deal.

It needs to be pointed out at every opportunity that the marginalisation and social deprivation in many working-class areas is a result of decisions made in

London, which have been supported by all shades of unionism, and that it is local representatives going forward, making decisions and being accountable to the people that is the best way to undermine unionism. The challenge is whether republicans really take up the mantle of Tone and the democratic politics he espoused or whether they are nothing more than Catholic nationalists. The unionist establishment have as much contempt for working-class Protestants as they have for working-class Catholics.

The Southern establishment is clearly concerned about Sinn Féin, with the three-and-a-half establishment parties in the Dáil all singing from the same hymn-sheet. There is a large element of class self-interest in their attitude to republicans. They know that political forces that have been dormant for decades have become activated, and that this is not good for them.

Now is the time for the maximum unity of all those who wish to see a united state established and the building of an all-Ireland democracy, centred on the needs of working people and not tiny elites.

New banking force in France

IT was always a demand of the Irish labour movement that the state set up a third banking force, using An Post as a central plank. This proposal always met with outright hostility from the big private commercial banks that dominate the Irish banking system.

In France on 1 January 2006 the French equivalent of An Post, La Poste, launched a wholly owned subsidiary, the Banque Postale, to provide financial services in direct competition with the three main private banks (Crédit Agricole, BNP Paribas, and Banque Populaire).

The Banque Postale will use the 17,000 post offices throughout France. It will offer customers personal loans and 100 per cent mortgages and will further develop its mortgage range over the coming years. La Poste has already been providing a range of financial services, including current accounts and bank cards.

The postal service has been campaigning for the last decade to have its role in the financial market expanded and developed. This has provoked strong resistance from the private banks. (It's amazing how those who preach competition to others and laud the virtues of the "market" always dislike competition.)

The post office network's 17,000 outlets far outnumber the 9,000 of Crédit Agricole. The financial service sector of La Poste has 28 million customers, of whom 12 million have a post office current account, while Crédit Agricole has 22 million customers.

This development in the activities of La Poste will go a long way towards keeping post offices open in rural areas and small towns. In Ireland we have all the main banks closing down their branches, and An Post complaining that it can't sustain the number of rural post offices. An Post is even closing down sub-offices in large towns and cities, claiming the fall-off in letter post as the main factor.

Clearly through political pressure—and the very fact that it makes a lot of economic sense and is socially desirable—this development is accepted by the current right-wing French government. The post office in many rural areas gives a valuable public service by providing services that are not necessarily profitable but are



socially necessary. This is just as true in Ireland as it is in France.

This is a policy that needs to be dusted off by the Irish labour movement. A campaign to enhance the role of An Post and extend the range of services it can provide to its customers would draw a wide range of political and social groups in behind the labour movement and help reactivate its grass roots and local influence.

Information, or government propaganda?

WITH the defeat and rejection of the EU Constitution by the French and Dutch peoples, the elites of the European Union went into a complete tizzy, and some of them sulked in the corner at the audacity of the people in turning down their great plan for Europe.

The heads of government then called for a “period of reflection” on where they should be going, and for the people’s opinions to be sought.

How has our government approached this “period of reflection”? Well, first of all the Department of Foreign Affairs gave a significant grant to the Irish Jesuits for holding a large-scale conference in the Croke Park Conference Centre (one of the dearest venues in the country) on the future of Europe. Not one speaker from any of a wide range of critical groups was given a place on the platform, despite numerous requests to the organisers.

They were all going to discuss why the French and Dutch voted No; but those who have similar criticism to make here in Ireland were excluded. A strange type of dialogue!

Recently the Department of Foreign Affairs made public the names and the amounts of funding paid to organisations for promoting “dialogue” on the European Union

and where it is or should be going.

- The Irish Council of the European Movement is to receive €252,000 for 2006 to “enhance awareness in Ireland of what the EU does and how it does it.” This group calls itself independent; but Bertie Ahern is president, and Ruairí Quinn is chairperson.
- The “Communicating Europe Initiative,” which falls under the Department of Foreign Affairs itself, will receive €205,000 to promote “greater debate.”
- €5,000 will go to the European Institute.
- And the poor old United Nations Association will receive €28,000—a good indicator of where current thinking is.

No organisation with a critical view is given a look-in.

The EU commissioner Charlie McCreevy will be in Dublin in late February to address the Forum on the Future of Europe. The Green Party’s proposal to the forum that Susan George—a leading public figure in the No campaign in France, chairperson of the Planning Board of the Transnational Institute in Amsterdam, and the author of a dozen books—who will be in Dublin at the same time, would share the platform with McCreevy. This generous offer was turned down.

Once again it appears to be a dialogue of the deaf. Clearly, some opinions are more important than others.

A spectre haunting Europe

LATE last year the Political Affairs Committee of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe adopted a draft resolution introduced by Göran Lindblad of Sweden, a member of the European People’s Party, with the title “The need for international condemnation of crimes of totalitarian communist regimes.” This will go to a full meeting on 23–27 January.

This individual is of the opinion that the French Revolution and the Paris Commune were major mistakes in the development of European history. He and his likes believe that the working class have their place and should know their place and not seek to get above their station. Clearly democracy is of little value to this particular grouping.

The resolution is part of a continuing campaign in several eastern European countries, with the connivance of the European Union and the US government. Many of the countries backing this resolution are client states of the United States. They have sold enough of their nations’ political and economic sovereignty to be strangers in their own land, while their people are scattered across the globe looking for a living. Since 1989 they have been pursuing a campaign for the outlawing of communists and the banning of their symbols. Instead of burning books (as many of them have done in the past) they want to rewrite them to vindicate their own actions. The government of Estonia has erected a statue to honour the Waffen SS right beside a statue built many decades ago to honour the 50,000 Red Army soldiers who gave their lives in liberating Estonia from both German and Estonian fascists.

The draft resolution states that “communist parties are legal and active in some countries, even if in some

cases they have not distanced themselves from the crimes committed by totalitarian communist regimes in the past.” This approach shows the dark hand of the fascist era, when communist parties were banned and thousands of communists rounded up, many of whom never survived the torture and extermination camps.

The drafters of this resolution attempt to equate communists with fascists, to suggest that they are two sides of the same coin. This is a complete absurdity. The rise of fascism was aided and abetted by western governments in their efforts to smash the Bolsheviks of Russia. Fascist regimes have been supported and propped up by various US governments, of whatever hue, right across Latin America for many decades in their continuing campaign to isolate and stamp out left and progressive forces. Who trained and organised the fascist thugs of Latin America but the United States government in the School of the Americas in Columbus, Ohio?

The Soviet Union lost 20 million people in the struggle against fascism. Tens of thousands of German anti-fascists, including many thousands of communists, died at the hands of the Nazis. The first political and social organisations banned by the fascists were the communist party and other working-class organisations.

The ideas of communism are a direct descendant of the ideas and values of the Enlightenment period, and

they express the noblest and highest aspirations of humanity: ending the exploitation of one human being by another; harnessing the resources of the world; using the advances in scientific knowledge to benefit all the people; bringing equality between men and women, putting an end to racism, sexism, and exploitation.

Our own party lost many of its best and brightest comrades on the battlefields of Spain fighting fascism. Many more died fighting fascism throughout Europe. Communists right across the globe have been to the fore in the fight for national liberation against colonialism and imperialism. Here in Ireland our party comrades stood shoulder to shoulder with those who fought for the Republic and against the Free-Staters. It was instrumental in building the unemployed groups in the 1930s, 40s, and 50s. Our party succeeded in getting an unemployed worker elected to Dáil Éireann during the dark days of the Cold War; the party could have stood a candidate, but it was more important that the question of mass unemployment and mass emigration be emphasised. Our party brought dignity and fighting strength to the mass of poor and unemployed in Belfast and Dublin and in other towns and cities when no-one else cared or were too scared to stand up and be counted—or were lying along the Border blowing up RUC toilets.

Our party members were among the founders of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association, which mobilised tens of thousands of working people, both Catholic and Protestant, to end discrimination, for “one person, one vote.” Communists here in Ireland and right across the globe have been the backbone in the building and sustaining of trade unions and other workers’ organisations.

Yes, ladies and gentlemen of the Council of Europe, communists have contributed to the advancement of humanity. We have sought to give dignity and organised power to the working class, and we make no apologies, nor will we ever apologise to you or your likes. For us to apologise to you would be for us to disown our own history, to disown and forget our comrades who fell in the struggle against fascism, to those who died fighting for national freedom in Africa, India, Latin America, and Asia.

The international communist movement continues to evaluate our history, including the mistakes that were made in our attempt to build a new world in place of the one that was and still is dominated by the forces of oppression, violence, and exploitation—the system we call imperialism. Mistakes, yes, we have made. Our evaluations continue; so also does our struggle.

Judgement upon our actions and what we have done and what we achieved, and the mistakes we have made, we will leave to future generations of working people to adjudicate upon.

To Göran Lindblad: If “communism is dead,” if we have been defeated, if “history has ended,” why are you wasting your time on us?

We leave the final words to Karl Marx. His words from the opening lines of the *Communist Manifesto* still resonate down the decades: “A spectre is haunting Europe—the spectre of communism. All the powers of old Europe have entered into a holy alliance to exorcise this spectre: Pope and Tsar, Metternich and Guizot, French Radicals and German police-spies.”

• You can sign the petition against the Lindblad proposal by going to www.no2anticommunism.org.

All our rights are at risk

THE action taken on behalf of the Government by the Minister for Justice, Michael McDowell, in leaking Garda files to the *Irish Independent* is a threat to all our democratic rights. Speaking on RTE Radio in early January, the Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, defended the action on the grounds that it was “in the public interest” and that it was not directed against the Centre for Public Inquiry but was to alert the public about a “dangerous subversive,” in the person of the investigative journalist Frank Connolly, executive director of the centre.

This clearly is not true and is a smokescreen. McDowell has spent a lot of time and effort pressuring the funders of this organisation, Atlantic Philanthropy, and in particular the Irish-American Chuck Feeney, to withdraw their support and funding. McDowell even invited the directors of Atlantic Philanthropy, while on a visit to Dublin, to a meeting in the Department of Justice, where he showed them the Garda files. What is this but a direct assault on the Centre for Public Inquiry, using the funders as the means of undermining it?

The Director of Public Prosecutions had given his opinion last year that there was insufficient evidence and that Frank Connolly had no case to answer. It appears that the Gardaí were of the same opinion. Once again the figure of the former unionist MP John Laird appears in the picture. He mentioned the Centre for Public Inquiry in the British House of Lords. What has this centre to do with him, or with the House of Lords? Who is leaking all this information to this individual, and for what reason?

Who has most to lose with the possible closing of this centre? Who gains most if there is no independent investigative body?

The strategy seems to be that Laird raises concerns, makes unsubstantiated allegations and puts names into the public domain under privilege; this is then picked up and presented as fact by the establishment media, which can now print or broadcast the names and information without fear of libel, and without evidence. This is taking trial by media to a dangerously new level.

The press, and in particular the Independent Group, is leading the charge. Tony O’Reilly is concerned about future developments on this island; maybe he has something to hide?

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