

SOCIALIST VOICE

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Workers need to read the warning signs!

AS the negotiations for a new “social partnership” deal get under way, the labour movement is faced with many important challenges that will inevitably have a significant impact on the whole future of the trade union movement.

Workers have heightened expectations in relation to pensions, working conditions, the subcontracting of increasing numbers of jobs, the gross exploitation of immigrant workers, and the almost non-existent enforcement of labour laws throughout the economy, as well as the looming privatisation of Aer Lingus and possibly the ESB. SIPTU has reported an increasing number of cases in which immigrant workers have not even received the national minimum wage; and this abuse is more widespread than just the few publicised cases, such as Gama or the recent case of Irish Ferries.

SIPTU has given the following examples of abuses now taking place and that form part of the backdrop to the current talks:

Carrickacroy Mushrooms, Co. Cavan: A mushroom-picker was required to work from 6 a.m. to 7 or 8 p.m., seven days a week, on piece rates that were the equivalent of €3.50 an hour—half the *minimum* wage. (Her case is now being investigated by the Labour Inspectorate.)

Irish Ferries: A beautician, Salvación Orge, was engaged on a six-month contract to work on an Irish Ferries ship at a rate equivalent to just over €1 an hour.

McCann and Sons (Construction): Polish and Lithuanian workers employed on a housing development in Mullingar were found to be getting as little as €4.31 an hour—before deductions!—compared with the minimum rate for the construction industry at that time of €14.74 an hour. The union has also uncovered similar underpay-



ment of Latvian and Lithuanian workers employed by McCann's at a building site in Clonsilla, Co. Dublin. There have also been reports of Russian building workers working and sleeping on building sites in the Dublin area.

Unions with a membership in the private sector experience these conditions daily, but it is now clear that the subcontracting of public-sector jobs is gathering pace,

which the recent case in Galway has highlighted. This abuse is not something that concerns workers in the private sector only but is the concern of all workers.

The commitment of the present government, driven as it is by neo-liberalism, to the needs and interest of workers can be seen from the number of labour inspectors employed to police the enforcement of labour laws, such as the minimum wage, Working Time Act, etc. In the Republic today there are 41 health inspectors to enforce the smoking ban, approximately 50 dog wardens, more than 200 agricultural inspectors, and 700 tax inspectors, but only 21 labour inspectors (to be increased to 32 shortly). Clearly, enforcing the smoking ban and catching dogs are higher priorities than the lives and working conditions of workers.

A recent report by the inspectors themselves illustrates how poorly equipped they are to carry out their work effectively, as a result of a lack of resources, training, and staff, as well as limitations on their powers and insufficient legal support. A bosses' dream situation!

“ If there is no struggle there is no progress. Those who profess to favour freedom and yet depreciate agitation are men who want crops without ploughing up the ground; they want rain without thunder and lightning . . . This struggle may be a moral one, or it may be a physical one, and it may be both moral and physical, but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did, and it never will.—Frederick Douglass (American anti-slavery campaigner), speech at Canandaigua, New York, 3 August 1857. ”

The average length of service of a labour inspector is fifteen months. This would suggest a very high turnover, which must lead to a lack of continuity in enforcement. The inspectorate is only rarely at its full complement, because of delays in filling vacancies. Clearly, given the high turnover, there is a need for somebody to look at the working conditions of the inspectors themselves.

Under the circumstances, is it any wonder that unscrupulous employers believe they have a good chance of avoiding detection! They know from experience in relation to tax compliance that they are not likely to get caught.

And even for the few who get caught and have the misfortune to fall foul of a labour inspector, the penalties for breaches of the legislation are so insignificant as to have no deterrent effect. With fines generally ranging from around €500 to €2,000, many rogue employers believe that non-compliance is worth the risk. They know it pays to break the law.

The Minister for Enterprise, Trade, and Employment, Mícheál Martin, recently announced that another eleven inspectors are to be recruited. But even at their new strength of thirty-two there will not be enough inspectors to police complex legislation covering 1.6 million employees in thousands of work-places.

Another area that the labour movement has only recently woken up to but that will have serious repercussions is the Services Directive, now being debated in that toothless body, the European Parliament, which will be voted on in mid-February. Those of us who opposed



the Nice Treaty drew attention to the potential dangers in the whole process of closer EU integration for the living and working conditions of workers throughout the member-states. Those concerns were dismissed as nonsense and without foundation. But they still apply to the now “parked” EU Constitutional Treaty.

This directive will allow not alone a company owned by someone from one of the low-wage countries but also an Irish person to register a company in one of those countries and employ labour from that country here in Ireland. So the Irish Ferries and Ryanair model can be applied throughout large sections of the economy.

The Services Directive could be enforced as early as June this year, which raises a serious question over the idea floated by the ICTU for an agreement lasting six years. An amendment now being considered to provide for compliance with labour law in the host country would do nothing to protect employment standards. All this would necessitate is the application of the minimum wage—which would quickly become the maximum wage, as we don’t enforce existing legislation.

The whole process is not about helping “poor eastern European countries” develop, as their economies have been decimated by the application of the policies imposed by the European Union in order for them to gain membership in the first place. There’s no point in having colonies if you can’t exploit them!

The Irish Ferries dispute has proved that it is nigh impossible to legally enforce Irish labour law on companies registered outside this jurisdiction. Taking the word of a government that has paid lip service to the enforcement of its own laws is a very dangerous and somewhat naïve strategy.

It is clear that workers are looking for a more dynamic leadership than heretofore. Certainly leading elements in the ICTU are determined to get a deal regardless. Their approach was demonstrated at the meeting of the ICTU Executive just before the big demonstration last December. Leading members wanted the protest called off the day before the march was to take place, with SIPTU holding out and sticking to its course of action. These elements appear to have a blind faith in this government doing something about Irish workers’ concerns.

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Dunne's Stores reach a new low

A leading Irish retailer, Dunne's Stores, has unleashed a clamour of support for a sacked worker, Joanne Delaney. Thousands of people—trade union activists, politicians, and ordinary people in the street—have expressed their horror and disgust at this latest development in the long-running saga of deplorable anti-union tactics and exploits by Dunne's Stores.

Joanne, a shop steward for Mandate—the union for Ireland's retail and bar workers—was sacked from her job as a sales assistant in the Dunne's Stores branch in the Ashleaf Centre, Crumlin, Dublin, for “a breach of the company's dress code.” This breach was wearing her union badge on her uniform while at work; but, despite numerous attempts by Joanne and her union officials, the company has not identified exactly where it states in their dress code that the wearing of badges is prohibited.



Joanne with her union badge

Similarly, Mandate had sought to represent their member and shop steward at a disciplinary hearing convened by the company on 21 October, but, because Joanne was accompanied by her union representative, this meeting was cancelled. On 29 November she received a letter from her employer informing her that she had been dismissed.

While this unfortunate and unsavoury event has shocked the thousands who have declared their support for Joanne, Mandate is not surprised at this latest low point in the company's petty and vindictive campaign against its members and representatives. There has been a long-running saga of poor industrial relations between the company and the union, in which Dunne's Stores have repeatedly and consistently ignored the well-tested and proven industrial relations machinery and its many codes of practice on numerous employment issues—most notably, disciplinary procedures.

Those politicians who are demonstrating their admir-

able declarations of support by ensuring that this issue reaches the highest echelons of their parliaments—such as Finian McGrath TD (independent), Sharon Hodgson MP (British Labour Party), and Colin Fox MSP (Scottish Socialist Party), who have submitted motions of support for Joanne—should also appreciate that this employer, a major participant on the employers' side in social partnership, is determined to smash any trade union activity within its work-places.

Dunne's Stores, by this most recent action, have sent a clear and unequivocal signal to its work force that union membership and its representative role and responsibilities will not be tolerated; and while there has been considerable negative publicity around this particular case, this company—whose anti-union strategies are redolent of employers' tactics at the beginning of the last century—will not and do not care. Their past record proves this!

While the support is heartening for both Joanne and the union, it only serves to demonstrate that the only way this company can be “brought to heel” is by Dunne's work force recognising their collective strength and clout and exercising that dynamic to remove the real, tangible fear factor in their work environment. Therein lies the difficulty—which, I hasten to add, is reflected in many private-sector work-places.

The only guarantee in doing nothing is that nothing will change . . . with Dunne's Stores anyway!

[CC]

Facts on inequality in Ireland

- Between 1989 and 1998 the death rate for all causes of death was more than three times higher in the lowest occupational class than in the highest.
- The death rate for all cancers among the lowest occupational class is more than twice as high for the highest class, is nearly three times higher for strokes, is four times higher for lung cancer, and is six times higher for accidents.
- Perinatal mortality in poorer families is three times higher than in richer families.
- Unemployed women are more than twice as likely to give birth to low-weight babies as women in the higher

- professional group.
- The incidence of chronic physical illness has been found to be two-and-a-half times higher for poor people than for the wealthy.
- Men in unskilled jobs are four times more likely to be admitted to hospital for schizophrenia than higher professional workers.
- The rate of hospital admission for mental illness is more than six times higher for people in the lower socio-economic groups than for those in the higher-income groups.
- The incidence of male suicide is far higher in the lower

socio-economic groups than in higher-income groups.

■ 39 per cent of people surveyed in 2003 identified financial problems as the greatest factor in preventing them from improving their health.

Some groups experience particularly extreme health inequalities

■ Members of the Traveller community live between ten and twelve years less than the population as a whole. The 2002 census found that only 3 per cent of Travellers were aged over sixty-five, compared with 11 per cent of the population generally.

■ The rate of sudden infant death among Travellers is

twelve times higher than for the general population.

■ Many expectant mothers in “direct provision” accommodation suffer malnutrition. Babies in these communities suffer ill-health because of diet, and many adults experience hunger.

■ Homeless people experience a high incidence of ill-health. A report in 1997 found that 40 per cent of hostel-dwellers had a serious psychiatric illness, 42 per cent had problems of alcohol dependence, and 18 per cent had physical problems.

■ The incidence of injecting drug abuse is almost entirely confined to people from the lower socio-economic groups.

Harney continues to drive private medicine

THE recent decision by Mary Harney to push for the implementation of risk equalisation between the publicly owned health insurance company VHI Healthcare and the British private health insurance company BUPA is to be welcomed and indeed is long overdue.

There are three main health insurance companies in the Republic: VHI Healthcare, BUPA, and Vivas. The VHI insures 80 per cent of private subscribers, four times as many as the 440,000 Irish people insured by BUPA; but it also has 50 times the number of policyholders over the age of seventy. It therefore has more subscribers who would be likely to avail of its services. BUPA, on the other hand, is aimed at younger people, who are more profitable.

The chief executive of the VHI, Vincent Sheridan, has stated that it will need €44 million in risk equalisation by 2007 if it is to remain solvent. BUPA estimates that it will be forced to pay more than €30 million to the VHI this year alone.

BUPA's primary objective is to make a profit, and the vehicle is providing private medical insurance. There is no altruistic motive: just making a profit, as large as possible; and, most importantly, the rate of profit should be more than the previous year.

BUPA was granted a temporary injunction preventing the introduction of risk equalisation over the Christmas period, but this was then overturned, and the new condition came into effect in early January. BUPA has appealed the decision to the Supreme Court and has stated that it will take it “all the way to Europe.” It has threatened to pull out of the Irish market, as it claims that it would take up to three years to exhaust its legal appeals.

When BUPA entered the Irish medical insurance market it was aware that risk equalisation was a condition of entry. This is the problem when we have elements of private and public medicine. Private medicine will always be more expensive, because the primary objective is to make a profit, that is, to have a surplus over and above the cost of providing a medical service to the individual citizen.

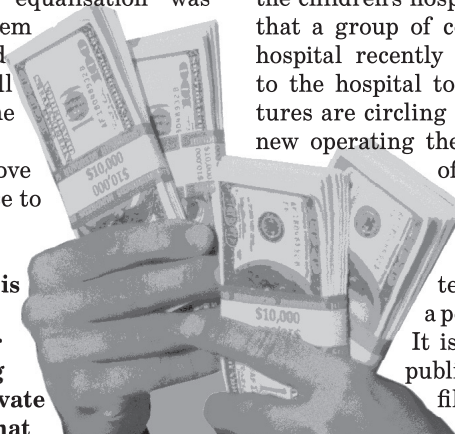
The growth of private medicine and of private hospitals and clinics is undermining the public health service. With people like the former “beef baron” Larry Goodman being one of the main investors in the private hospital outside Galway, we know that

his involvement in the provision of private medical care is not about ending or shortening queues in public hospitals: it is to ensure the maximum return on his investment. Sides of beef or sick people—it doesn't matter to him.

The fact that Harney has activated the risk equalisation payments does not mean that she has any real commitment to public health. There is a real danger that the VHI could be privatised in the near future if the courts uphold the decision of the High Court. Under the old conditions, where risk equalisation was not operational, no private company would be prepared to buy the VHI. It is clear that private medicine will only grow and expand under Harney's stewardship of the Department of Health. The vehicle for expanding private medicine is the consultants, who are in many cases mere front men or women for American private medical companies.

One example of this is Our Lady's Hospital for Sick Children in Crumlin, Dublin. The director of the private Beacon Hospital in Sandyford recently proposed that the children's hospital should be moved to a new site, next to his private hospital, and that they could then avail of and share their medical facilities. He also stated that the existing staff would lose their public-service status if this move was to take place.

This particular individual is believed to be a major financial contributor to both government parties. It is clear that Mary Harney is very much in favour of moving the children's hospital to a new site; it has also emerged that a group of consultants attached to the children's hospital recently purchased the leisure complex next to the hospital to provide recovery facilities. The vultures are circling the prime site of the hospital and the new operating theatres, built at a cost of €30million, of which a significant amount was raised by ordinary people around the country. The Treatment Purchase Scheme, introduced as a temporary measure, has now become a permanent feature of our health service. It is a very effective conduit for pushing public patients through private hospitals, filling the coffers and the bank balance of people like Larry Goodman.



Tubaiste cheannasaíocht Rabbitte

NÍ tapadóireacht go dtí é an moladh seo ag Pat Rabbitte go mba cheart go mbeadh sé n’iallach ar inimircigh ceadúnas oibre a bheith acu. Tá rabharta ciníochais sa tír faoi láthair agus é cothaithe ag nuachtáin Lord O’Reilly, cuid de na stáisiúin tráchtála raidió, agus go leor de chomhairleoirí áitiúla Fhianna Fáil. Tá oibríthe ó oirthear na hEorpa agus oibríthe ón iarthar curtha i ngleic lena chéile, a bhuíochas sin do pholasaithe fadtéarmacha an Aontais Eorpaigh.

Is é is cuspóir do na polasaithe sin cúlú a dhéanamh ar a bhfuil bainte amach ag gluaiseacht na n-oibríthe le leathchéad bliain anuas. Ceann de na polasaithe sin is ea an treoir nua-mholta um sheirbhísí atá le reachtú ag an gCoimisiún neamhthofa agus atá á cur chun cinn go díograis-each ag Charlie McCreevy, a ligfidh d’fhiontair daoine a fhostú ar na tosca dlíthiúla a bheadh acu sa bhallstát ina bhfuil an chuideachta cláraithe, seachas sa tír ina bhfuil siad suite.

Bheifeá ag súil leis go mbeadh páirtithe daon-sóisialacha ag iarraidh an pá agus na coinníollacha oibre in oirthear na hEorpa a fheabhsú agus a thabhairt ar aon chéim (ar a laghad) leis na coinníollacha a bhain oibríthe an iarthair amach ó 1945 i leith. (Ba thoradh é sin ar thrí rud, dála an scéil: gluaiseacht láidir ceardchumainn, mórthionchar páirtithe den eite chlé, agus eagla an domhain ar an aicme thiarnais roimh scáth Aontas na Sóivéide.)

Taobh amuigh den fháilte aisteach atá curtha roimh mhóladh Rabbitte faoi cheadúnais oibre ag ard-uachtarán SIPTU, Jack O’Connor, níl de thacaíocht aige ach David McWilliams agus an eite sárdheis de pholaitíocht na hÉireann, an dream atá in aghaidh inimirce i gcónaí. Is léir go gcreideann Rabbitte go bhfuil vótaí le baint amach ón gcuid sin den speictream.

Go dtí seo níor bhain ceadúnais oibre ach le hoibríthe ó thíortha taobh amuigh den Aontas Eorpach, agus dóibh siúd níl i gcóras na gceadúnas ach córas daoirseachta. Bíonn ceadúnas ceangailte le fostóir, rud a chuireann ar chumas an fhostóra smacht mídhaonna a imirt ar an oibrí. Bíonn faitíos ar an oibrí an gearán is lú a dhéanamh agus inní air go mbrisfí é, go gcaillfeadh sé an ceadúnas, agus go seolfá ar ais go dtí a thír dhúchais é.



Cé chomh híseal is a rachaidh Rabbitte sula mbeidh sé críochnaithe? Ba dhroch-chinneadh ann féin é a shocrú go rachadh sé isteach i rialtas leis na Léinte Gorma dá mbeadh an uimhríocht i gceart tar éis an chéad olltoghcháin eile. Ach ba mhó go mór ná droch-chinneadh é a fhógairt go ndéanfadh sé amhlaidh gan réamhphlé ná comhaontú maidir le polasaí rialtais de a thuaradh. Ba shárú prionsabail

é. An leanfaí leis an gcóras dé-aicmeach sna hospidéal? An gcuirfí stop le sruth na saighdiúirí Poncánacha trí Shionainn agus iad ag déanamh ar an Iaráic? An ndéanfaí aon iarracht ar an mbochtaineacht a ídiú in Éirinn an rachmais?

Ciallaíonn an easpa freagraí nach bhfuil ceannasaíocht na linne seo ar Pháirtí an Lucht Oibre ag iarraidh dul isteach i rialtas le hathruithe réamhbheartaithe a bhaint amach sa tsochaí ach le haireachtaí a bhaint amach ar a son féin. Mercs and perks for jerks! Tubaiste a bheidh ansin sa deireadh má leantar leis—agus tubaiste do Pháirtí an Lucht Oibre go háirithe.

Mar bharr ar an meon sin thug Rabbitte go leor samplaí eile dúinn dá dhearcadh le bliain anuas: an t-ionsaí gránna pearsanta ar Mick O’Reilly, an feachtas mi-ionraic in aghaidh Declan Bree, an ciúnas maidir le ceisteanna bunúsacha ar nós na cánach bruscair, an frith-phoblachtas aineolach.

Is léir ó chaint agus iompar Rabbitte le fada an lá nach bhfuil aon deacracht aige le Fine Gael, an páirtí is faide ar dheis taobh theas den teorainn, taobh amuigh de na PDs. B’fhéidir go mbeidh sé ina bhall fós! Tharla sé cheana do cheannaire eile dá pháirtí, Michael O’Leary (mark I). Má tharlaíonn sé sin, cuimhnigh gur anseo a léigh tú i dtosach é! [CdF]

British still blocking change

AS the Northern peace process remains stalled, with the likelihood of the re-establishment of the Executive and the Assembly further away than ever, it is important that progressive opinion remain focused on what is happening.

The recently released and “eagerly awaited” report of the Independent Monitoring Commission into the continued activities, real or otherwise, of paramilitary groups in the North—particularly in relation to the IRA after its final act of decommissioning last September—is a very strange concoction indeed.

The political establishments, both Irish and British, are clearly more concerned about the IRA than they are about loyalist paramilitaries, for very real but different

reasons. From a Southern viewpoint, loyalist violence does not impinge upon the politics of the state, and they know that the British have a lot of control over their actions, while republican influence continues to grow, north and south. The British security apparatus, such as the Security Service (“MI5”) and the PSNI Special Branch (political police), have been running loyalist organisations for decades and have been engaged in their own dirty war for the last forty years. The British are

more interested in controlling the process and ensuring an outcome that meets their current objectives.

The IMC report claims that the IRA has retained some of its arsenal of weapons. They quote sources stating that they cannot quantify exactly what the IRA has retained: "Reports are not able to indicate precisely what is the nature or volume of any remaining weapons but suggest two things—first, that there is a range of different types of weapons and ammunition; second, that the material goes beyond what might possibly have been expected to have missed decommissioning, such as a limited number of handguns . . ."

The IMC goes on to state: "We recognise that, if these reports were confirmed, the key question would be how much the PIRA [Provisional IRA] leadership knew about these weapons."

One of the members of the IMC, Commander John Grieve, was quoted as saying, "We have no doubt that the Provisional IRA uniquely amongst paramilitary groups has taken a strategic decision to abandon terrorism and pursue a political path." He went on to state that there was no evidence of IRA recruitment or training, and that it had no intention of attacking members of the "security forces," nor had it carried out any attacks in the period under review. So how can this body make claims that the IRA still retains weapons?

The body that oversaw the decommissioning of IRA weapons, the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning, headed by General John de Chastelain, also issued a statement, coinciding with the IMC report, stating categorically that they had witnessed the complete decommissioning of IRA weapons, and further that they had recently had two meetings with a representative of the IRA in relation to the allegation contained in the ICM report.

De Chastelain also stated that "over the past week [the last week in January] we have discussed the intelligence assessments with senior officers in the Garda Síochána . . . The Garda informed us that what they regard as reliable sources in relation to the IRA and its weaponry have produced no intelligence suggesting any arms have been retained." The decommissioning body suggested that the source of recent questioning of the decommissioning carried out was "security sources within Northern Ireland."

What is happening is that we have one body drafting a report based on "intelligence" presented to them by forces that are actively engaged in undermining the whole process. In a situation where the nature and role of policing is a very controversial and divisive issue, this body treats a number of discredited groups as accurate and true sources for reliable information. This is farcical beyond belief. This body and the two governments—particularly the British—are allowing the political police and MI5 to determine how the process develops. It has given them a virtual veto on progress.

So instead of the British bringing pressure to bear on the DUP to seriously engage in the process, they are attempting to put the pressure back onto republicans as the obstacle to progress. Clearly unionism is still a neces-

sary ally for the British in its current strategy.

As the *Socialist Voice* pointed out in the last issue, there are serious forces at a very high level within the British security service who are attempting to derail the peace process. They carried out a virtual coup d'état by using their leading operative within Sinn Féin to bring about the suspension of the Assembly and Executive.

These same forces have been raiding homes and businesses in the North, and in Britain, to coincide with important moments in the political process so as to stoke up the tension and block any attempts to re-establish the Executive and Assembly. The IRA decommissioning all its weapons in September last year was a blow to those elements of unionism that want to block political progress and change, and also to the political police and MI5. All the efforts of these forces are now concentrated on splitting republicans and securing a political process that meets the needs of their political masters in London.

They are attempting to use the frustration with the slowness of the political process within republicanism to manipulate those who feel that the more they give the less they get from the process.

Another disturbing development was the recent release of information to the press by the Department of Justice about raids carried out by the Criminal Assets Bureau on more than twenty pubs and offices and a hotel in the Dublin region and the seizure of computers, disks, and files. These raids took place in the last week of January but were made public only to coincide with the release of the report by the Independent Monitoring Commission.

The Minister for Justice, Michael McDowell, is hell-bent on fighting his own war against republicans in the

South, regardless of the damage to the peace process. His actions are designed to prevent the growth of anti-establishment forces in the Republic. He is prepared to use everything to achieve this, including reinforcing intransigent unionism in the North.

This can all be dressed up in whatever clothes they like, but it is a taste of what class struggle is about. They want a compliant republican movement, decommissioned of all politics. They do not want political parties that are independent of the business interests that finance and control the establishment parties in Dáil Éireann: Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, the Progressive Democrats, and the Labour Party. They know that he who pays the piper calls the tune. There is a distinct hostility in the tone of McDowell's actions and attacks, in the projection and reinterpretation of events presented by the *Irish Independent* group and the rest of the establishment media.

What both the British and Irish establishments need is to control and manage change to suit their interests, which is not the same as what working people require or aspire to. Their strategy of reconfiguring the middle ground with permanent SDLP-UUP control over the Executive has collapsed; their second line is to decommission radical republican politics. They want to "house-train" radical republicanism.

The question now facing republicans is, Do they want to be "house-trained" by the establishment and enter the swamp of parliamentarism and electoralism?

There are serious forces at a very high level within the British security service who are attempting to derail the peace process

Bolivia and the Axis of Good

WHEN Evo Morales, the recently elected President of Bolivia, visited Cuba and Venezuela after his election a commentator described the three countries as an “Axis of Good.” Certainly the election of Morales with an unexpected 54 per cent of the vote, and a parliamentary majority as well, was extremely unwelcome to Condoleezza Rice and the American oil companies she represents. It was a manifestation of the enormous mobilisation of the people of Bolivia, especially the indigenous majority.

This mobilisation has, over the past few years, reversed the privatisation of water in the city of Cochabamba, which had been carried out in accordance with the dictates of the IMF and forced the resignation, and flight, of President Sanchez de Lozada (“el Gringo”), who had signed away the natural gas reserves to transnational oil corporations. Subsequently his successor, Carlos Mesa, was also forced to resign.

Bolivia, now the poorest country on the South American continent, has been a source of great wealth since its “discovery” by the Spanish *conquistadores*. The silver mines of Potosí enriched the Spanish crown for three



The President of Bolivia, Evo Morales, with the President of Venezuela, Hugo Chávez

centuries. In the twentieth century an equivalent fortune in tin was extracted; and a third robbery, of natural gas, was well under way. This is something the popular movement is determined to prevent, and the main reason why Evo Morales was elected.

The Bolivian people have clearly rejected the neo-liberal economics that the imperialist powers, in particular the European Union and the United States, wish to impose on them. They are far from isolated; the revolt against imperialism is manifesting itself in different ways throughout the entire continent.

[SE]

WTO betrays poor people yet again

FROM the 13th to the 18th of December last year, ministers from 149 governments around the world met in Hong Kong to negotiate what was intended as the final leg of a development-focused round of talks. This so-called “development round” was agreed in 2001 at the World Trade Organisation meeting in Doha, Qatar, where rich governments promised—under pressure from the governments of poor countries and protesters around the world—to put the fundamental concerns of poor countries at the forefront of the agenda of the WTO negotiations.

But—as a growing mass of activists who are speaking out against the WTO point out—there is nothing remotely developmental about the WTO. What transpired from the talks in December was yet another betrayal and devaluation of the lives of poor people in the majority world by the governments of rich countries.

Leading up to the talks, poor countries were deeply concerned to protect their markets from forced liberalisation and heavily subsidised products from rich countries, which are having a detrimental impact on their domestic economies. The nature of the agreement reached in Hong Kong, however, highlights clearly the fact that issues that are of vital interest to poor countries were sacrificed to the priorities of the rich. This is illustrated through a lack of progress on a range of issues. For example, the failure of the United States to

adequately address its cotton subsidies will continue to put African cotton farmers out of business. The failure at Hong Kong to make progress on securing “special and differential treatment” for poor countries also fails to establish a basis for allowing the application of different trade rules to countries at different economic stages.

Much has been made in the media of the agreement at Hong Kong by the European Union to phase out export subsidies to European farmers by 2013. However, this hard-fought-for and minor gain is not copperfastened in the text and pales almost to insignificance when compared with the concessions forced on poor countries in relation to services and industrial tariffs. In addition, concessions to “least-developed countries” to receive duty-free, quota-free market access could exclude certain important goods viewed as too competitive by

rich countries. For example, the United States could block imports of textiles and clothing from Bangladesh, while Japan could block imports of cheaper rice from Cambodia.

More than nine hundred arrests were made in Hong Kong as protesters fought to make their voices heard against the lack of democracy at the WTO. The South African activist Kumi Naidoo, commenting on the Hong Kong meeting, said: **“Once again this year the people have roared and rich countries have barely whispered. The wealthiest nations have squandered a critical opportunity to rise above vested and commercial interests to inject development into this so-called ‘development’ round. While they avoid and postpone redressing the gross imbalances in global trade, millions of women, men and children are denied the basic human right to lead their lives in dignity, free from hunger and want.”**

Despite this depressing picture, poor countries demonstrated a far more aggressive and unified approach to protecting their people’s interests through the formation of the “Group of 110,” comprising poor countries from various regions and blocs. As the Hong Kong meeting postponed key decisions, especially in relation to agriculture and industrial goods, further meetings are likely to be held in April and July this year.



Activists around the world have vowed to continue fighting the human suffering and environmental destruction being perpetuated by the WTO in 2006. As Percy Makombe from the Southern and Eastern African Trade Information Negotiations Institute asked, **“Who will stand up for the poor? To question those who want to auction our lives is not only our right: it is our duty. To challenge those who seek to commodify our lives is not only a necessity, it is our responsibility.”**

[NNC]

Venezuela offers to assist American poor

FROM New York to Chicago, the Venezuelan state-owned oil company Citgo has been attempting to implement the offer made by President Hugo Chávez, after Hurricane Katrina, to provide diesel and heating oil to some of America’s poor to offset the rise in prices imposed by the oil corporations.

In a society that is dominated by corporations and in which every aspect of human life has long since been commodified and has value only if you can make a buck on it, governments since the end of the nineteenth century have been dominated by the interests of corporate America.

Oil has already been distributed at reduced rates in New York to some of the poorest communities in the city. This unique action of solidarity has met with widespread support, though it is anathema to the corporate elite of the United States. Over the Christmas period Citgo made a deal with three non-profit organisations to distribute 5 million gallons of heating oil in the Bronx district of New York at 45 per cent below the market price.

More than eight thousand low-income families have now benefited from this solidarity action. In Boston it is estimated that poor families will benefit to the tune of \$10 million with the distribution of 12 million gallons of heating oil through the Citizens’ Energy Corporation.

Citgo has been attempting to negotiate with the Chicago Transit Authority (CTA), the city’s Department of Energy and other city officials about passing the



saving from reduced diesel costs on to the poor of the city in the form of free or reduced travel cards that offer 40 to 50 per cent discount for public transport.

Despite more than two months of negotiations, no progress was made. The transit company has instead increased its fares by 25 per cent, and abolished a number of existing concessions.

The CTA relies on the federal government for funding, thus making it susceptible to political pressure. The Bush government

recently announced the allocation of \$89 million in infrastructure project funds that the CTA had been seeking for years.

This is a small but important step in pointing out that the world’s resources belong to us all and not to profit-hungry global corporations, and that our world will be a more civilised place when the cancer of capitalism has been made history.

SOCIALIST VOICE

7 Bloom Lane · Dublin 1
(01) 8747981 · cpoi@eircom.net