

workers solidarity movement

summer 2010 issue ●●●●●●●●

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# The Irish Anarchist Review

Free!



# unions /work

summer 2010 issue ●●●●●●●●

# welcome to/

# .....The Irish

# Anarchist Review

Welcome to the first issue of **The Irish Anarchist Review**, the new political magazine from the Workers Solidarity Movement. This magazine will explore ideas and practical struggles that can teach us about building a revolutionary movement today. We decided to cease printing Red & Black Revolution, and start this project, aimed at provoking debate and discussion among anarchists and the left. For this purpose, we will be pursuing a non-sectarian approach, taking ideas from various left currents, mainstream discourse, and reflections on experiences of life and struggle. We will take, print, and discuss, anything that we find useful for our needs. We hope that readers will have a similar attitude, and will use the magazine to discuss, debate and develop ideas. We will also welcome submissions and responses to articles.

This issue is shaped by the current financial crisis, and more particularly, by the reactions of the Irish political and capitalist classes, as they pursue an aggressive strategy of cutbacks. We have seen the implosion of the building sector, the foundering of the banks upon corruption and incompetence and the failure of our foreign investment based economic model. Moreover, we have seen that the government response has been to protect the banks and builders by transferring wealth from social services, public pay and increased taxation straight into bank bailouts and NAMAland. This needs to be identified for what it is: an act of outright class warfare.

We are faced with a situation where a strong and organised response to government attacks is absolutely necessary, but is constrained by the prevailing ideology and practice of partnership. The most pressing concern for Irish radicals today is to build a labour movement that rejects the corporatist mentality and service-delivery model of ICTU and poses instead workers self-organisation as the basis for struggle. With this in mind, this and future issues will look for inspiration in revitalising class-based politics.

The weakening of Irish organised labour through the 'Celtic Tiger' period is examined by James R's article, and he poses some requirements for the emergence of a class movement that can deal with the threats of the present while bearing a vision of a better future. Andrew Flood looks at some of the positive elements of recent struggles, emphasising the possibilities for self-organisation and direct action made visible in the recent struggles.

We feature two articles that try to learn from the experiences of radicals internationally. Ronan McAoidh reviews the work of Swedish group, Kämpa Tillsammans!, which argues that affinity between workers, not just union organisation, is the basis of successful struggles. An interview with Alex Foti explores organising tactics that try to deal with the growing trend of flexible working conditions.

The reviews also tie into this theme, assessing the development of an American working-class counter-culture and, by looking at workplace blogging, discussing some ways in which this can be done today.

Overall, this issue attempts to learn from the current weakness of the Irish working class, and explores both the origins of this weakness and some routes towards a combative class movement, capable of disrupting the ruling class offensive on living and working conditions and posing an altogether different vision of society, and, most importantly, a way of getting there.

WORDS : DARA MCAOIDH

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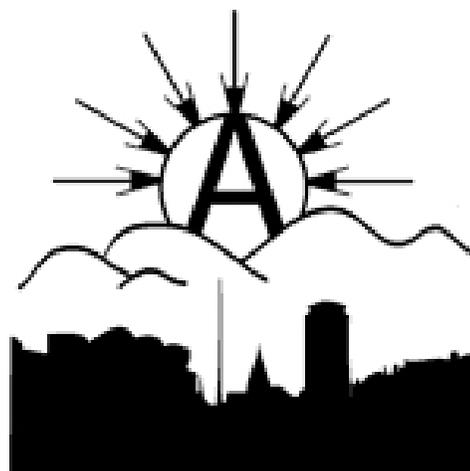
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## about the wsm/

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

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

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



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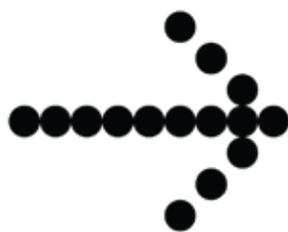
Editorial Committee

Andrew Flood, Gary Barrett, Gavin Gleeson, Dara Mchugh, Mary Flynn, Ray O'Hanrhan, Mark Malone, James Redmond. Thanks to all members of the WSM for contributions, discussion & feedback. A special thanks to Martha for spell checking.



# reflections on the 24th of November/

On the 24th of November something extraordinary happened. Some 250,000 workers acted together in a day-long strike against the public sector wage cuts planned by the government. The vast majority of these workers had never gone on strike before, yet across almost all workplaces the strike involved 90% or more of those working.



WORDS:  
ANDREW FLOOD

This strike took place in the face of hysterical attacks on public sector workers, which included one business commentator suggesting that those going to strike were guilty of High Treason. Conviction for High Treason when Ireland was under the British empire used to involve the person being hung until they had passed out, then being revived so a hole could be cut in their belly and their entrails dragged out before an axe man would cut off their limbs one by one and then, finally, chop off their head. The Class War is clearly escalating from the point of view of the capitalist class!

There is much that can be criticised about the organisation of the strike; after twenty years of social partnership, almost no one in the unions knew how to organise a strike, from the national leadership to the rank and file. This often left those at the base feeling abandoned or trapped in nonsensical decisions. But that is not the interesting story of the day; the interesting story is that despite all the problems, in almost all cases, workers organised themselves at the branch and section level to build effectively for the strike and day-long picket.

The main outcome of the day was that 250,000 workers quite suddenly found themselves thrust into a common identification of workers standing in opposition to local management and the state. All this under a crazed ideological offensive from the capitalist

class. Many, perhaps most, had been very apprehensive about going on strike. The actual experience of strike swept away many of those apprehensions and did more in one week to build a confidence and organisation at the base of the unions than had been done in the previous decade.

At the time of writing, between that strike and the potential second one on the 3rd December, it is not clear how the new found militancy will develop. There may be some crappy deal negotiated by ICTU which will defuse the situation until the next time when the government returns for another cut. But the employers are fighting a very aggressive class war, they may not be willing to allow any compromise. In this case, we may already be in the midst of an escalating wave of strikes by the time of publication.

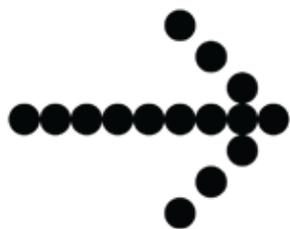
Either way, we have seen a massive demonstration of the potential power of workers when we stand together as workers. That power has been almost invisible in Ireland for two decades but it clearly never went away. That demonstration is what we can build on to fight the crisis and fight for a new world in the months and years ahead.





# Capitalist crisis and union resistance in Ireland/

Late 2008 saw the Irish capitalist class wage a major ideological struggle against the Irish working class.



WORDS :  
ANDREW FLOOD

They called for workers to bear the brunt of the capitalist crisis. Print media, TV and radio carried segment after segment where well-paid commentators argued that workers, in particular public sector workers, were earning too much, had overly generous pensions and that the public had unrealistic expectations of public services.

We were told that in order for recovery to happen we would have to have all these rolled back. Private sector workers, we were told, were over-paid and had to become 'competitive' again. The offensive quickly shifted from rhetoric to reality. A significant number of private sector workers had pay cuts in the months since. Many private sector workers and large numbers of contract public sector workers lost their jobs. By the middle of 2009, a huge pay cut had been imposed on the public sector and detailed plans had been drawn up for a new round of cuts in the Autumn. Yet at the end of the summer the supposedly cash-starved government found €60 billion of public funds to buy up the banking sectors dodgy loans to property speculators. This is an offensive on Irish workers at a level

that hasn't been seen in over two decades. A joke has been doing the rounds on the left that it represents the greatest transfer of wealth in Ireland since the Cromwellian conquest. But while that was one older, traditional ruling class losing its property on a mass scale to a newer section, the NAMA transfer has been from workers to the existing rich.

At the start of the crisis, the Irish unions were in a weak condition; 20 years of social partnership had seen rank and file organization collapse and the arrival of often anti-union transnationals had seen a massive decline in union membership in the private sector. A very large percentage of jobs created during the Celtic Tiger boom were in non-unionised workplaces, particularly in the services sector. As might be expected, this has meant that organized resistance has been limited and often only occurring in local and desperate circumstances. But nevertheless there has been limited resistance, what have we been able to learn from this?

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**At our Spring National Conference in April, the WSM collectively summarized our experiences in the workplaces during the opening months of the offensive as follows.**

**5.1** The crisis has revealed for all to see how weak the unions have become at the grass-roots level. A majority of WSM union members found themselves in situations where their local branches could not be called functional in any real sense. Our current position paper assumes a functioning union structure at the local level and is entirely based around this which meant that those members had little or no guidance about what they should be doing that could actually be implemented in the time frame.

**5.2** The attempt to build a network of militants across public sector unions failed after a lack lustre but not insignificant start at the meeting of public sector workers in the Davenport hotel. The cause of that failure is a mixture of only token involvement by the left and the undemocratic & bureaucratic informal organisation it started from and the high levels of disengagement with unions that exists even within unionised workplaces.

**5.3** In terms of workplace organising we can identify three situations:

**a)** Unionised workplaces where there is a reasonable level of rank & file activity. That is where people have contact with their union representative and there are general meetings to discuss issues of importance where workers can enter into debate with their fellow workers as a group.

**b)** Unionised workplaces where for whatever reason there is little or no rank and file activity as yet. In these cases the methods of involvement we advocate members carry out in the position paper may not be at all easy to implement in reality as they often presume such activity.

**c)** Unorganised workplaces where unions do not exist. Again here there is a major hole in our existing position paper on the unions probably because we have the expectation that recruitment is the work of the unions rather than revolutionaries. However the experience of unorganised members and contacts is that attempts to join unions frequently result in unanswered calls or letters and that even in unionised workplaces it is not that unusual for attempting to join taking long periods and requiring follow up calls.

**5.4** In the last months members who found themselves in situation a) were in a position to implement policy in a way that influenced events and are relatively buoyed up from this experience. However members in situation b) and c) were in a very different situation and in some cases have been demoralised by the experience.

This description was agreed shortly after the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) had called off the one day national strike that had been scheduled for March 30. Although this strike was canceled on the flimsiest of excuses the build up to it had demonstrated that the union movement was not perhaps as dead as some had thought. The momentum towards the strike had built massively in the aftermath of the February ICTU organized demonstration against the planned cuts. Over 120,000 workers had taken part in this demonstration, the

vast majority marching as part of their union delegations. The WSM leafleted the length of the march as it passed our banner calling for a 'National Strike Now' before joining in at the end. At that point it was not clear that the union leadership, would call such a strike, within a couple of weeks under pressure from below and from factions within the union leadership (the CPSU going as far as staging a one day strike on their own) the date for the national strike was set for March 30.

## **OUR STRATEGY IN HINDSIGHT**

In hindsight our strategy once the strike was called was ineffective. We recognised it likely that the leadership would call it off if the government offered any sort of concession; our response included trying to create a public sense of expectation through street postering, arguing and supporting arguments in individual workplaces for local action regardless and taking part in initiatives that aimed at some co-ordination of militants across the unions. These attempts included union officials and even a couple of union presidents as well as rank and file union reps and ordinary members but they proved too weak and fractured to even come close to providing an alternative leadership to ICTU. In the weeks between the February demonstration and the calling off of March 30th, WSM members faced the range of experiences in our workplaces summarized in the position paper above. Many of the experiences were not very positive as even in technically unionized workplaces some members found themselves unable to overcome the lack of local democratic structure in their workplaces or branches. Because this was generalized across union branches all over the country this meant that the ICTU leadership kept a tight control of the build up towards the strike. Days before it was due to happen the government offered the most token of talks and ICTU seized on the excuse and called off the national strike.

The experience of the March 30 buildup led to demoralisation but looking beyond the surface it was far from a universally bad one. In a few workplaces, typically those where the left already had some influence and our members or others on the left had some experience of how to use union procedures properly, it was possible to argue for and pass motions that allowed some rank and file control of the strike process, sometimes in mass assemblies, sometimes through branch committees with functional delegate systems. This wasn't the experience of any but a tiny percentage of union branches in the country but it seems to have been the normal experience where there was a functional union democracy at the local level and even a slight left presence. Nothing like enough to make a difference but more than enough to suggest there could have been another outcome to those days.

Even where this did not happen, workplaces sometimes came out of the period more organised than they had entered it, because of the period of preparation for March 30 and the build up to the February demonstration. This was probably the experience of just under half our members who were somewhat active union members in this period, itself a fraction of WSM union members. A confirmation that even a handful of left activists with sufficient preparation can sway very much larger numbers of their fellow workers where the conditions – in particular the holding of assemblies – have

been created. In such conditions workers could move quite quickly in this process from a fairly typical fear of union militancy (at the start it was quite normal for officials to feel they had to reassure workers that they were not trying to push them into a strike, the reverse of how anarchists like to imagine things) to one where there were unanimous votes for strike action.

## **GENERAL INITIATIVES**

It's important not to overstate this. Attempts by the left to use this new confidence in workplaces to launch more general initiatives based on getting these members on the street failed. The attempt by the SIPTU Education branch for instance to launch a general initiative under the title of 'Grassroots Unite' failed to go anywhere despite getting the use of union headquarters for a founding meeting. The demonstration called from this meeting attracted only a handful of the two thousand branch members, despite the fact that the vast majority of these members had been voting for industrial action in the preceding months. This and the similar tiny turnouts of the September 2009 anti-NAMA demonstrations exposed how isolated the far left and republicans are from the working class in general. None of the various demonstrations or stunts called by the left parties and their fronts since February have attracted more than 1% of the number who took part in the February demonstration day (and most have seen far less). On the other hand the September 2009 community sector demonstration organised by SIPTU on a working day saw 10,000 march, demonstrating that there is still a willingness to mobilise. This is a reminder that small left groups cannot substitute for the mobilizing power of the union movement through hard work alone.

One major problem was certainly the weakness of the left. Despite the usual tendency of organisations to talk themselves up, the reality is that there are a tiny number of left and left-republican activists on the island. Anarchists and others on the libertarian left are a minority within this left but one that had grown significantly in this decade, but beyond the question of number, the impact of the libertarian left in particular during the February-March period was far less than might have been expected. This was because this was not the sort of struggle we had been preparing for, nor had it emerged from the sectors we had been looking at as a source of militancy. Our attention had been focused elsewhere.

## **OUT OF FOCUS**

The period of intense 'anti-capitalist' summit protests that ran from Seattle to Genoa generated a discussion among many participants about how best to organise locally. The was the right discussion to be having but perhaps it was too driven by the search for exciting new methods of the sort that had revitalised and reinvented the left around the summit protests. This is not surprising, the rhetoric of the official union movement was a million miles from that of the 'anti-capitalist' movement and at least some of the organisational methods of each were almost counter-poised to the other. On top of this, across many sections of the movement a set of ideologies came to dominate that wrote off the unions as the outdated, traditional, male, etc, remnants of former years. I don't intend to consider these theories in detail here beyond saying that even in their most ad-

"The organising experience of the last few decades has been forgotten by the movement as a whole but the information is out there."

vanced form they seemed based around conditions that existed in a very few industrial areas for a brief span of years when the actual reality of unions as they have existed in different places and times has been very much more complex. There isn't and never was a single union model. Finally and not insignificantly because many of the new activists from the summit protest movement were young and often students they were overwhelmingly concentrated in temporary, part time and seasonal employment. The idea of 'organising locally' coming out of the summit protest movement was open to being literally interpreted to restricting organising to where ever you happened to be working.

One outcome of this was that many on libertarian left followed a set of tactics which concentrated on marginal workers in insecure employment. Apart from reporting on struggles and the work of individual members in their workplaces much of our collective writing and activity from 2000 onwards tended to concentrate on 'precarious' workers in harder to organise sections like retail and alternative unions (in Ireland for instance in the form of the Independent Workers Union). In terms of the libertarian left this was an international pattern that flowed from the Euro Mayday parades in Italy and elsewhere to the IWW organising drives in Starbucks which were concentrated in the USA but which also spread internationally.

The problem with this approach is that it has had very limited returns for the effort put in. This almost-exclusive focus needs to be questioned. Yes, it would be nice if such workers were organized, but, given our tiny numbers, does it make sense that this is where we are putting a lot of our thought and activity? In terms of resistance to the crisis in Ireland, it pretty much has had no returns; none of this work or writing prepared us for the actual situation we faced as the unions started to mobilise. What did turn out to be of some use was the traditional activity that some members had been in a position to carry on in this period. What was a pity was that we hadn't taken the steps to encourage more to do likewise and to spend the time working out a critical collective approach to doing so. As we threw things together early in the new year there simply wasn't the time to get up to speed in the limited time available.

It is clear that we should have ambitions way beyond trying to build what amount to small affinity groups of like-minded workers in a couple of workplaces. It is clear that where militants have the required level of knowledge about how unions work, in organised workplaces, it is possible to create situations in a climate that breeds both grassroots life into the union and pushes the vast majority of the membership towards a militancy that they initially start off fearing. If this is possible, why settle for less?

This is not an argument against organising more precarious sectors. However would it not make more sense (as some have) to on the one hand concentrate on building rank and file power among workers who are organized and on the other hand concentrating organization drives on those whose terms and place of employment gives them some real power? There are interesting examples from the USA of this being applied with considerable initial success among health workers in Vegas and hotel workers in Chicago, a success measure in double digit wage increases and similar benefits. These are important for a couple of reasons, firstly because they



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are areas of growth in what would be viewed as non traditional sectors. These are not blue collar industrial sectors, these are not male-dominated sectors of employment and both have a high percentage of workers of colour. Many of the grades (in particular cleaners) would be considered precarious, but part of the strength of these drives was they were organising into general unions rather than craft unions (that is nurses and cleaners would be in the same unions rather than separate ones). Rather than expecting the precarious workers to fight on their own they can draw on the collective strength of the core workers they are alongside in the same institutions.

## WAVES OF ORGANISATION

From the strategic point of view, it would seem to make more sense to imagine a wave of organization that starts with workers who are concentrated into larger workplaces and whose strikes have some real social power than with a wave that starts with the most marginal workers who often have little intention of sticking around in a particular temporary employment. The point of workplace organizing should be to win and to create a sense of workers' power that can then spread outwards. From that point of view we should aim at fighting our early battles not where we are weakest but where we have the greatest strength. As the examples above suggest, the form of organisation (e.g. general rather than craft workers) should be one that can bring in what would be considered precarious workers in the sectors targeted. In the Irish case this would include reversing the waves of outsourcing of the 1980's and 1990's that saw cleaning and catering jobs in particular being separated off from the main employer in schools, hospitals and universities. This would also mean bringing an influx of new members into large workplaces, such an influx can help shake up and invigorate existing workplace organisation.

In the short term, in particular in relation to the crisis, we face two problems. The first is the reality that knowledge of union procedure is quite thin on the ground. The complete lack of militancy in the unions over the last couple of decades and the death of rank and file structure has meant that in most cases there were no mechanisms that allowed members to simply pick up this knowledge through participation. This need not be a very serious problem as it is relatively easily addressed through training. More importantly as the public sector strike on the 24th November demonstrated when workers are thrown in at the deep end without training mistakes will be made but successful spontaneous organising will overcome many of these.

The more serious problem is the huge sector of the workforce in Ireland that remains unorganized and the fact that the unions lack the skills to organize these workers even if they had a serious commitment to doing so. There is however a cart and horse question here. How reasonable is it to expect workers in vulnerable positions to take the lead in organizing their workplaces into unions that seem unwilling to take the steps needed to defend the interests of those members they already organize? What is the point of joining such a union? The answer to that question is probably one to be found in winning a couple of significant victories that demonstrate that the power of a union is not in the lawyers and negotiators that they can provide but in the power of workers standing

together.

This article is intended to open a debate on where we should put our energy, it is nothing even vaguely approaching an advocacy of how an organising drive directed at workers in a strong position can be carried through. However there are already many anarchists with both positive and negative experiences of such drives, I refer to a couple of US examples above. An acceptance of the general line of argument put forward here would start with an investigation of these struggles and be followed by an examination of how, if at all, this may be applicable where you live. Much of the organising experience of the last few decades has been forgotten by the movement as a whole but the information is out there, we need not reinvent the wheel.



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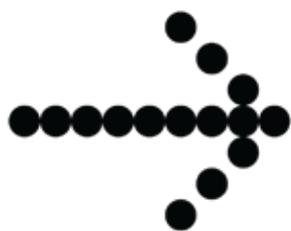
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# mayday had become like a funeral/

In August of 2008, Italian media activist Alex Foti visited Dublin. In the middle years of this decade, Alex Foti became known across activist circles for involvement in the Euromayday Parades.



INTERVIEW :  
MARK MALONE &  
JAMES REDMOND

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In a special themed issue of Green Pepper, Foti and the Chain Workers Collective sketched a very attractive understanding of the work discipline of contemporary capitalism. In their understanding, society had found itself in a situation of profound disjuncture with our working pasts - life today was defined by contingent employment rather than the traditional job for life. Working through Chainworkers, Foti and others developed the Euro Mayday Parade as an opportunity for this sentiment pool to express itself in European cities, along the way they developed a graphical tool set and pioneered a new vision of a combative class movement that drew huge attention to the question of workers marginalised from the traditional unions.

## THE ORIGINS OF EURO MAYDAY

**Mark Malone:** Maybe give us a bit of background on Euromayday, where it came from and an idea of how it moved from theory to practice and out onto the streets?

**Alex Foti:** Euromayday started out of Chainworkers, a collective that merged labour activism with media activism. They started agitating in the year 2000, inspired by the movement of Seattle and No Logo by Naomi Klein. So we put up a site and we decided to reclaim the original

anarcho-syndicalist meaning of Mayday. The meaning it had before World War 1 basically. When it was a day of revolutionary activity and celebration, of anti-capitalist celebration.

So we did this parade in 2001 and we invited the McStrikers and Pizza Hut strikers to Paris to participate. And we ended up with 5,000 people shouting "tous ensemble contre la precarite." So this rallying cry against precarity, against flexploitation, the persecution and discrimination of young migrants and migrants in general, were at the core of the mobilisation. Of course, being a parade there was a lot of subvertising involved. Then through p2p media, lots of creative icons and communication vehicles and games were produced. These helped popularise the ideas behind it, and helped its popularity.

Every year the most militant labour gang or crew gets the honour of opening the parade. And this year, it was immigrant groups from all over Northern Italy that got that honour and they organised a significant portion of the parade.

## IMMIGRANT GROUPS

**JR:** You mention that you've quite recently come into contact with immigrant groups, I understand there

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**were significant immigration struggles in Italy during the 1990's, what forms of organisation are they using now?**

Mostly, it's self organised groups or associations of Italians and migrants that either belong to the left or to the autonomists. And also there are many in the service and agricultural sectors, they are the delegates of the unions, either mainstream or radical unions, but that is not important. This is basically what is organised in Italy in terms of immigrants.

It must be said that the anti-globalisation movement supported the struggles of migrants as they appeared, with the focus being on detention centres. To shut down detention centres and stop deportations and especially, the massacre that takes place in the Mediterranean waters between Sicily and Libya daily for years now. The indifferent Italian authorities sometimes let them sink and drown to get rid of the problem.

In my own evaluation, and I think it is shared widely enough, the movement failed to organise the young immigrants on the ground in the cities. Several of the social centres are of mixed ethnicity and are organising Latin American students, Chinese immigrants and organising with Egyptians and so forth.

Italy, like Ireland, has a history of recent immigration, it is not like France or Germany where immigrant communities have been there for ever and ever. It's a phenomenon that's occurred over the last twenty years.

But young immigrants, like in France, do not yet have their own voice. Although, the second generation is a special mix, it is huge. It's extremely hard for someone who is an immigrant and is born in Italy to get citizenship which is absurd.

## THE ROLE OF SOCIAL CENTRES

**JR: You mention the social centre movement plays a role in organising the immigrant communities, and you also mentioned anarcho-syndicalism and the IWW, the meeting hall always played a role in organising what could have been considered precarious workers in the early 20th century. How do social centres in Italy fit into emerging labour strategies?**

Yes, with the San Precario points, San Precario being this ironic icon that is meant to embody the pleas, demands and conflicts of the precarious generation. There have been a number of cafes and clubs that attract young workers. In a social venue there would be labour assistance, some lawyers, some unionists to talk to you about your problems. There are internet cafes, maybe a show at the end of the night. So they became a bit like wobbly halls, where you could just check in each week and have a concrete answer to some needs on your job, a problem that you have with your boss or employer, but you can also meet other people and organise pickets, actions, share information and black list employers and spread information on an exploitative situation.

## THE UNIONS OF THE BASE.

**JR: During the Genoa protests, COBAS had quite a strong presence in the streets, I haven't really come across much about the Italian unions of the base in recent years. How have the networks you are involved in related to the movements of the base? Are they still strong?**

The two largest are COBAS which descends from the 1977 autonomist tradition, they are strong in the public sector, especially among precarious teachers, temp teachers and then CUB. Which in fact the union with which we did the first Mayday. And since then, we've always worked together. They finance about half of the budget of the Mayday parade and they have provided union assistance in certain labour disputes we've had. But we've had autonomous organisation and also legal assistance. It's an alliance but it's not that we are formally tied in any other way.

In Milan, Mayday had become like the funeral of the working class because manufacturing has completely disappeared, there were dwindling numbers of people attending the traditional Mayday demonstration in the morning. So, with this union we both realised the need to go beyond that. Which is why Mayday occurs in the afternoon and after the third edition it has completely dwarfed the one done by "the unholy trinity".

Basically, The Unholy Trinity is the three mainstream unions, one is reformist and socialist, the second one is Catholic. Like in Ireland, they are in social partnership with the government which has ended up in the fact that Italy now has the lowest wage rate in Europe with Greece. So, really they are not much into the interests of the workers.

So, going back to COBAS. Their interest has been decreasing, they are strong in the social fora because they were there from the start and they are a bit maximalist, the problem is they have no clue how to address the private sector, which is the one you really have to unionise. At least in that respect we've had more success. They weren't in the first Mayday, but they've started joining it from the second one, so at least in that respect they are part of the network.

## THE PARALLEL WITH IWW

**JR: You've left Chainworkers, but at the time you were advocating concepts like flexi-fights, these are notions that seem to cut across the more traditional craft union approach, and there again is that parallel with the IWW approach in the states. Are you conscious of these parallels?**

Definitely so. I've been so inspired by the wobblies, by the sabocat, by Ralph Chapman's song, Joe Hill and so forth. Definitely. The wobbles in the early 20th century America embodied the interests of the industrial working class that was being deskilled, there was the immigrant masses that went into steal plants, the textile plants across north america, where as the moderate unions, the craft unions represented the white working class with skills and so on and so forth.

So fast forward a century after, where we wanted to express the interests of the outsider or the discriminated segments of the work force that are not being represented in the social compromise that takes place between big unions, big business and the state that is typical of Europe.

So the outsiders in our opinion, were the service and the knowledge classes. These were the two that have seen an explosion in terms of numbers and in terms of value added. We saw how flexibility stultified the worker just as much as

Taylorism stultified, but it also brought them into contact with larger numbers that also share the same condition. We saw flexibility as a two way process in which, it's true that your rate of exploitation was increased, but your individual freedom, your freedom to use new digital tools to reflect upon your condition and network with others and organise strikes and so forth was enhanced. So flexi-fight was a way to advocate a new welfare state for the era of labour flexibility.

And so, an effort has been made with other autonomous spaces and unions from other European cities to synthesise a common platform of demands. Of course, the struggle in France in 2006, in which a whole generation of students and young workers managed to block the new law by the French government which would have effectively allowed the employer to pay young people less than other people was an important moment.

Another important moment was the victory of the young students and workers in terms of rent subsidies that was a huge struggle also, and the limitation of the recourse to short term contracts. Which is also a huge European problem, temp contracts with of course no welfare rights, no labour representation and of course, they are fireable at will and so forth.

So, we tried to invent new slogans, new catchy slogans, some times they worked, others were half theorised, we liked the sound of it. You know it was heady times. Everything was happening really fast in 2003 and 2004! Everything exploded!

## SOCIAL POWER

**JR: A lot of people were paying attention to the precariousity debates, especially as a lot of it was seen as giving to the experiences of young people in work who find themselves unable to relate to older traditions of class struggle or unionism. But a critique a lot of people had was that precarious workers don't really exercise any social power, they are not strategically located at the means of production, apart from an inherent peer to peer ability to communicate. For instance, bus workers can bring a city to a halt. How do you respond to those interruptions in the logic....**

Like Negri would say, from the factory to the streets. In the sense it is true. Labour is fragmented today, and in order to build community you have to build it, from work place to work-place, but in public social spaces within the city that are outside work. You build community outside work or through blogging. Or through spaces where people can meet or sections of the city where the alternatives hang out and informally share information.

That's why I agree with this critique, but since I don't think anything can be done to go back to huge numbers of workers working in the Krups plant or the FIAT factories overnight - my take is to use those places where there is a stronger socialisation of work, like in cleaning services, call centres, super markets and malls - where there is a huge concentration of post-industrial work and use those because they are highly public to disrupt the flows.

But the real trust of this change comes from as you said the peer to peer organising, the hegemony of immaterial labour in theoretical terms. The bet, the political bet is to have the hackers helping the cleaning ladies. I mean I don't know

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## /////may day had become like a funeral

if this is funny or not as a simple aphorism so to speak in, in order to express what we are trying to do, some times it works.

### CREATING SPACES FOR SOLIDARITY

**JR:** You speak of post-Fordism and touch on ideas such as "the social factory" and what appears in the English speaking world as theoretical academic constructs. But one thing you have succeeded in doing is crystallising these concepts into political and cultural initiatives that have created spaces for solidarity. How did that take place?

Our relative success was to develop media along the lines of the alternative free press you find in the street, we employed the language of pop and even MTV but transmitted anarchist and autonomist messages. I mean the whole May Day network has a pretty large ideological variety in the sense that I am influenced by Negri and libertarian influences but other people are more communist in orientation, some are straight forward anarchists, some are there because it is a radically democratic thing to do and they don't attach any importance beyond that, it's syndicalist if you wish.

It's not the 90's, the late 00's require a new way of fighting capitalist governance. So in the larger context, May Day is part of this, finding new ways of fighting capitalism that are sophisticated and have the ideological forms and communicative forms that don't belong to the 20th century. As Marx said, the dead weight of past generations can some times exert on living ones.

### THE DESIGN PHILOSOPHY

**JR:** Just one more question on that design philosophy, you know San Precario? It reminds me of Mistero Buffo by Dario Fo. How much thought and effort was placed into your design concepts?

Well, we needed a date for like a general strike in which we were mobilising with militant unions and precarious workers, and there was like this idea of having a strike at the end of the month at a given day, so like we should call it a day, the day of San Precario. In the assembly we thought it was kind of weird. So we said, if we really want this saint we should create a day for it once a year. Like every saint. So I proposed it be the 29th of February, you know the leap year, intermittent labour, intermittent saint – once every four years San Precario appears!

So, to protest against Sunday work we picketed and had the first statue of San Precario in a super market in Milan that had just opened. There were artists from all over Lombardy and so that was the day, the 29th of February 2004 that marked the birth of the patron saint of precarious people.

But what was cool, what really made it popular was the prayer card, with the prayer on the back. One guy wrote a prayer and it became really popular. For the drawing, one of the things that prompted me to start chain workers was Adbusters, it had an issue with the art by Chris Wood. This guy, he specialises in portraying fastfood workers in holy positions and stuff. The mysticism and the mystification of modern consumption!

So it all came together and I think more than 100,000 praying cards were handed out and to this day if the equivalent of the Irish Times in



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Italy wants to talk about precarious workers, say a new law discriminates against them, you are sure that San Precario will appear. It's the logo!

## MAKING CONTACT WITH WORKERS

**MM: To follow that on, in the actual nuts and bolts of making direct contact with small groups of precarious workers, obviously the form of communication helped but what other processes did you move from ideas to actually start to organise in those spaces?**

Okay, usually it is done this way, a few workers of a certain industry like the retail sector or call centres come to us either during demos or to San Precario days or points and signal a situation of insatiability, alarm or lay offs. So somethings got to be done, typically they've gone to main stream unions and have had no satisfactory replies. So a slow process of self organisation begins at which you start having them at meetings, little handing out of flyers and stuff, organising little wild cat strikes at the start or end of the day – seizing existing situations of unease to organise in the workplaces. And sometimes to run in the work place delegate elections.

But it was a bit of a snow ball, I mean Mayday was the glue on to which a lot of stuff was attached. Without it a lot of people would not have come to us.

This way of organising is now being replicated in other European countries. For instance in Belgium they have Public Precaire which is an anonymous collective identity that organises all the people that do the census, the interviewers. In Berlin and Hamburg the workers that work at cultural festivals, that are paid pretty shit, they use the carnivalesque invention to organise over certain issues. That's how I see...

**MM: Do you find that the processes of organising the Mayday's themselves, they lead through that networking process they lead to more stable forms of working together with smaller groups of precarious workers and beyond to larger networks?**

After 2005 there has been a retrenchment into local networking where as before it seemed like a national network would emerge of a syndicate of precarious temps. Now its mostly done at the regional level, so I don't know, if you don't think big things don't happen big.

## NATIONAL NETWORKS

**JR: So the attempts at a national network or a syndicate didn't come into fruition, does that not suggest that the model doesn't provide a stable base for organising workers or that people come into contact with the movement when they are in need of something? Or are you finding that precarious workers maybe carry a class counter culture from work place to work place or do they just pass through with transience?**

In 2001 we were among the few ones say-

ing precarity is the emerging European social question. And years afterwards, we were right in our prediction, in the sense that the social debate in Italy and in Europe is about this. There is a new green paper on social security and labour flexibility that tries to address, of course from the bosses side, these problems. The electoral campaigns in Italy have already twice been played on this precarious workers need a better deal. The centre left party will put on its material.

So, in terms of discourse we have opened a debate. Going to chainworkers, which is no longer my organisation, They've focussed on grassroots organising with local successes but not pushing the pendulum in the other direction by reversing the course of stuff.

It's like the problem of the anti-globalisation movement, they hate any kind of organisation. And so, you don't want to be a union, you don't want to be a party, but since you are an organisation, neither nor, you are not effective, in the end you end up pressuring the reformist left, the parliamentary left, the mainstream unions, the radical unions, it doesn't matter to do something. So it works in that way. You create public opinion, that creates a sentiment for improving legislation, subsidies, conditions, and stuff.

It's like the ideology of the left is not so popular, but it is still relevant in many ways for the lives of people. So rather start from a description of social reality and outline radical forms of organising and communication can get you far. That is our experience. The fact that a word like precarity, a latin word gets appropriated in English, that doesn't happen every often means that there is a wide spread condition starting from France, Italy and Spain and then to the rest of Northern Europe.

Of the popularity? Well, it was played out to be popular in this sense, the parade brings to mind the gay parade, the love parade, these hedonistic libertarian ways of partying too, that was popular with the young generation across Europe, with young ravers and club goers. So the format works. I don't know if I can be pragmatic about it. So it is popular in that way.

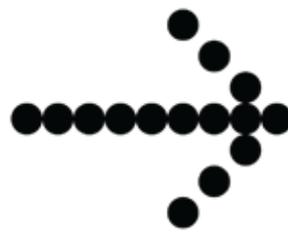
"We wanted to express the interests of the outsider or the discriminated segment of the workforce"





# the usefulness of faceless resistance /

Although Faceless Resistance as a concept has been discussed among radical circles in Sweden for several years, it has only recently begun to be noticed in the English speaking world, primarily due to delays in texts being translated.



WORDS :  
RONAN McAOIDH

In this article I will look primarily at the work of Kämpa Tillsammans, who developed the core ideas of Faceless Resistance, but I will also situate these ideas in their historical and social context and introduce other tendencies that have been influenced by and adapted some of the theory.

## GENESIS - SWEDEN AFTER ANTI-GLOBALISATION

As with many other countries around the turn of the century, the radical movement in Sweden was massively re-invigorated by the anti-globalisation movement. The highpoint of this movement in Sweden was the protests during the EU summit in Gothenburg in 2001, which culminated in several protesters being shot and a convergence centre being brutally raided. Similar to developments in Ireland, America and England, the momentum and energy aroused by the anti-globalisation movement turned to a period of self questioning and internal discussion as activists began to look for the next step. In Sweden, thanks perhaps to an already existing tradition of syndicalism going back almost a hundred years, this next step took the form of a focus on workplace-based confrontation with capitalism.

At this stage, study groups based in cities around Sweden had already begun to engage with the alternative Marxist tradition, from Italian operaismo trends of the 60s and 70s, to the autonomist Marxism of Harry Cleaver, and back to intensive reading of Marx's original works. These study groups sometimes formed the nuclei of future movement initiatives; in Stockholm for example, fare-dodging initiative Planka.nu, the Women's Political Forum,

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the Roh-nin publishing house, strike support group 'Stockholm United Commuters' and web-magazine 'The Daily Conflict' all developed out of a study group called Stockholm Autonomist Marxists. At the same time a tendency within SAC (the syndicalist union) called Folkmakt (People's Power) was engaging with different theoretical tendencies and developing a critique of the bureaucracy within SAC as well as the activism of the anti-globalisation movement.

## KAMPA TILLSAMMANS & THE OTHER WORKERS MOVEMENT

One group that developed in this fertile environment was a collective with members from Malmö and Gothenburg that became known as 'Kämpa Tillsammans!' (Struggle Together!). They started from the position that while the left wing typically sees class struggle on a formal level, consisting of union conflicts, strikes, pickets and negotiations, they ignore the daily experience of work and the struggle against it.

This position was informed both by theoretical perspectives and practical experience in the workplace. After beginning their first permanent jobs in a factory, members joined the union and tried to work within it to improve conditions. However they found the union organisers completely uninterested in their grievances and unwilling to take the conflicts further. The organisers were in fact surprised that these youngsters working temporary contracts were even members at all! Gradually, the young workers decided that the real action was not happening within union structures, but within the informal organisation of workers.

The group's practical frustration with union-based organisation developed their engagement with Marxist tradition, particularly that which stressed the importance of our daily experience of work for theory. The Italian operaist tradition argues that the composition of the working class is in flux and thus developed the practice of 'workers' inquiries' to constantly renew the vitality and relevance of revolutionary theory. The orientation of such inquiries resonated with Kämpa Tillsammans' own experiences and they concluded that the most fertile space for investigation, and intervention, lay in what the Indian group Kamunist Kranti called "constant innumerable, insidious, unpredictable activities by small groups of workers". Such 'unpredictable activities' defied acceptance of a passive role in either the production process or in pursuing grievances, and so was constantly hampered by the workers' own representatives as well as their bosses.

## CLASS COMPOSITION

"No methods of struggle or organizational models can correspond to the class composition forever. Regardless, a large part of the left is not able to renew politics when society changes. They stick to their old truths and try desperately to represent an out-of-date understanding of the working class. The class struggle has inevitably left the institutionalized left behind and made old political truths obsolete. This is an important explanation to why communist parties, unions, and other leftist organizations that used to have considerable political relevance in the

past, are totally out of touch today." Kämpa Tillsammans! No peace in the Class War!

Central to the practice of Kämpa Tillsammans is the understanding that radical theory must be closely tied to the actual reality of class composition. As the organisation of the production process changes, in response to diverse factors, from market conditions and new technologies to the development of class conflict, the working class also changes, and this will be embodied in its forms of organisation and methods of struggle.

For example, the early workers' movement in Central and Western Europe was based upon an organisation of work in which production was carried out primarily by skilled workers, concentrated in factories. These workers organised in craft unions and demanded control of production. Operaist academics argued that both this form of struggle and its goal were related to the specific conditions of work, and not to any objective theoretical 'correctness'. They pointed out that the resulting struggles forced capitalism to alter this organisation of work, and with the implementation of both new technologies and management techniques (conveyor belt-assembly and Taylorism, respectively), re-arranged the production process, de-skilling work, lessening the skill basis of workers' power, and thus undermining the hitherto dominant organisational form, the craft union. From this re-organisation older forms of struggle became irrelevant, and new forms developed to suit the changed context.

This analysis has a direct consequence for revolutionaries; since class consciousness and methods of struggle are constantly shifting, revolutionaries cannot simply accept the theories of past generations. We have a duty to investigate this changing composition in order to circulate the lessons from it, and derive theory to match the reality. Thus the centrality of the workers' inquiry; in this process, militants constantly engage with the experiences of class struggle to challenge their own preconceptions and create a constantly evolving revolutionary theory.

## WORKERS' INQUIRIES OR STORIES?

While traditional workers' inquiries tend to be quite formal, often involving questionnaires and formal interviews, the members of Kämpa Tillsammans chose instead to document their own (often humorous) work experiences, draw lessons from them and publish them on the internet. They deliberately chose the medium of story-telling because they wanted workers to engage with the stories in a way that is not possible with formal surveys. Kim Muller of Kämpa Tillsammans explains that they wanted to change the popular idea of what it was to be a worker; workers do not communicate with each other via "written pamphlets or leaflets but by talking and storytelling", thus stories provide a far better way to develop a new workers' discourse than dry analysis and documentation.

This practice has since become popular in the Swedish workers movement, with many militants reporting on their workplaces online on sites such as forenadevardare.se (for health workers) or Arbetsförnedringen (for

"stories provide a far better way to develop a new workers' discourse than dry analysis"





job seekers). The practice of workplace blogging can easily spread work experiences, showing the political dimensions in daily conflicts as well as giving clues about the changing composition of the working class.

One such blog, 'Postverket' is written by Postal Service workers. They see it as a way of developing the discussions that start in the canteen or on the shopfloor and circulating them among other workers in different sections and in other parts of the country. In turn, the discussions on the blog can serve as the basis for further discussion and action within the workplace.

The writers have found that, once introduced to the blog, their co-workers start to read it and discuss it with other workmates, helping to develop their ideas and sharpen their criticism of the bosses and the work.

Thus for the Swedish movement, workplace blogging has a number of different functions. On the one hand, by publishing online, workers can transcend their individual workplace to connect their experiences and ideas with those of other workers on the other side of the country. It allows for the deepening of political arguments and critique. On the other hand, workplace blogs can create a new discourse of work, and help to form the basis of a new working class identity. For many people, the mention of 'working class' summons up a dozen grey clichés, none of which are relevant to their experiences. Stories and experiences from modern workplaces can help to popularise a more relevant conception of work and class, that can in turn help to propel working class mobilisations.

#### **STRUGGLE TOGETHER**

These struggles, or practices, that struck management directly and made our lives immediately easier we came to call "faceless resistance" for lack of a better name. This was during a time when the left, our political environment, to a large degree saw that it was "calm" or "peace" at the workplaces, in stark contrast to our understanding of our situations at the workplaces. I still argue that an everyday class war is occurring and no peace is possible as long as capitalism exists.

#### **SELF ACTIVITY AND STRATEGY**

What Kämpa Tillsammans found in their investigations led them to develop the term Faceless Resistance. This referred to all of the small acts of workplace resistance that go unnoticed by the traditional left, but are vital to their understanding of class struggle. This list is nearly endless, but can include things such as taking extra toilet breaks, stealing cash or other things from the workplace, clocking out early or calling the boss an asshole behind his back. While these examples may seem trivial, they are important since they represent the struggle between our aspirations for a decent human life, and the constant pressure to reduce our lives to simply another input into the production process. What's more, struggling in this way can supply their reward immediately, as, for instance, as instead of going through a protracted union negotiation for less work hours, by skipping out early one achieves this goal directly and becomes conscious of one's own power in so doing.

Of course, this is not to imply that class struggle does, or should, consist solely in these small isolated acts of defiance; but that these small

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practices build collectivity between workers that can then be the basis of larger struggles. This 'worker's collective' has much in common with the 'affinity group' style of organising that members of Kämpa Tillsammans had learnt from the anti-globalisation movement. They suggest that the collective can be built up in 3 stages: 1) work together, 2) have fun together, 3) struggle together!

In the workplace we often naturally develop a sense of solidarity, as we co-operate to solve problems and pass the time. However, there are nearly always barriers between workers that limit the development of collective action such as hierarchies based on race, sex, work roles and seniority. Management frequently exploit these divisions by, for example, assigning different jobs to men than to women, or giving foreigners the worst jobs. It is necessary to break down these hierarchies in order to develop the solidarity between workers, and open the door to collective action.

The affinity between workers can be developed by playing around and having fun, inside or outside the workplace. While many companies try to use evenings out and 'fun events' for building team spirit and good relations between management and employees, Kämpa Tillsammans argue that having fun together away from the bosses is vital for building a strong workers' collective. Of course, the point of that these actions is not to be best friends with all your co-workers; this is a 'politics of small steps', by starting with these small actions one can build the solidarity and trust between workers that will allow progressively bigger struggles to be taken on.

## STRUGGLE IN, WITH OR AGAINST THE UNIONS?

One of the unusual features of the Swedish labour market is its high level of union organisation (80% of workers in 2005) in comparison to England or Ireland. This of course raises the question of how the ideas of Faceless Resistance relate to union organisation; do they oppose it, complement it or ignore it? The presence in Sweden of the SAC, a large syndicalist union, throws this question into sharper relief. Kämpa Tillsammans tend to remain ambiguous on the question of union organisation, stating that they are neither for or against union organisation; unions are a fact of life for workers in capital, and so long as people have to sell their labour, unions will be there to handle the deal.

For Kämpa Tillsammans focusing on the question of union organisation is a mistake, the real power in a conflict comes from workplace militancy, regardless of whether this is expressed through a union or not, arguing that "regardless of the view on the role of the trade unions, every successful struggle at workplaces came from the solidarity between workmates; a strong workers' collective." Thus the role of revolutionaries should be to build the workers' collective, rather than building the union organisation. The union framework for disputes can be used by the workers when it is appropriate and discarded when it is not, but the foundation for struggle must always be the solidarity and organisation of the workers.

Despite this ambivalent attitude towards union struggle, the ideas of Faceless Resistance have proven adaptable to a union context both within SAC and the LO (the main union confederation). Kämpa Tillsammans' ideas helped to influence the recent re-organisation of SAC, which shifted the union's orientation away from a service model of unionism, based on the management of disputes, and towards a more combatative position, giving workers more power over their own conflicts and

increasing the role of the local sections. This went hand in hand with an opposition to 'organisational chauvinism', i.e. a recognition that helping to win conflicts rather than members should be the primary activity of the union.

Meanwhile a network of workplace militants organised within the LO called Folkrörelselinje have incorporated ideas of Faceless Resistance into their own trade union practice, which works within the union to build strong workplace collectives. For them, Faceless Resistance can be another tool in the organisers handbook, that can be pulled out to suit certain contexts where other tools might not be appropriate.

## CONCLUSION

The concept of Faceless Resistance is a very useful one for revolutionaries today. The financial crisis and the cut-backs and redundancies it has entailed has opened up again the possibility of a widespread workplace militancy that had for so long seemed dead, and many young militants now have the opportunity to engage in meaningful organising in their workplaces. Kämpa Tillsammans' lessons about building workplace collectives as the basis for struggle seem especially relevant when the failure of the union organised fightback has exposed the weakness of their workplace organisation. A workplace strategy that focuses on organising within the union is not obviously useful in situations where there is no union in a workplace, or where the union exists in name only. This is not to say that revolutionaries should refuse to work within unions, but that this decision should always be a pragmatic one, made on the basis of the specific conditions within the workplace and the tactics most likely to develop militancy among the workers.

The practice of workplace stories and blogging is also very relevant. In a society where discussions based around a traditional class identity have come to seem passé and out of date, the formulation of a new discourse of class is vital. This cannot be predicated on the old bases of class identity, but instead on the daily experiences of work and the often invisible struggles against it. Workplace stories can provide a way for revolutionaries to communicate directly with workers, to construct a new class identity, and help build the movement that will abolish the wage system.



## links to readings

A Thematic History of the Swedish Radical Movement Since 2001

<http://swedishzine.wordpress.com/2010/03/16/a-thematic-history-of-the-swedish-radical-movement-since-2001/>

First English translation of Folkrörelselinje!

<http://swedishzine.wordpress.com/2009/06/09/first-english-translation-of-folkrörelselinje/>

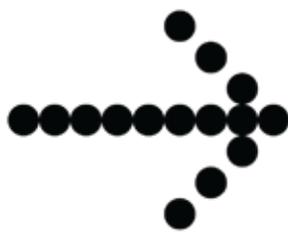
Hamburgers vs value - Kämpa Tillsammans

<http://libcom.org/library/hamburgers-vs-value-riff-raff-group>



# the unions after the celtic tiger /

A rather strange figure is moving to centre stage in Irish politics, that of the trade unions - absent from mass struggles until recently and weakened over the decades of social partnership, they are now the only possible source of a movement that can confront attempts to transfer the cost of the recession to working people.



WORDS :  
JAMES REDMOND

This statement does not come with out some qualms. Already this year we've seen the union movement back away from its role in galvanizing its members in the run up to planned day of action on March 30th when resistance was taking shape among the public sector unions.

Elsewhere, where there have been pockets of resistance like Dublin Bus, Waterford Crystal and SR Technics - they have been hugely defensive in nature and isolated. In the case of March 30th last year, what could have been a celebratory moment of mobilisation, instead shone like a portent of organisational decline for both the left and at roots of the unions.

Desptie NAMA, the McCarthy report and living conditions deteriorating, we've yet to see much of a coherent mass movement emerge in response to this crisis. Understandably, in Ireland there's a weak repertoire of struggle for people to seize upon in moments such as these, but more systemic factors are at play too, like a general malaise in the unions.

## THE TRADE UNION DECLINE THESIS

That there has been a decline in workplace based organisation in this country is not unique, it occurs in the context of an international concern around union decline and renewal. A number of major factors have been identified as undermining unions in the last two decades. Globalisation and industrial restructuring have played a role, alongside a shift in work practices, the sharp fragmentation of class identity, and the decline of a radical alternative vision of society within the labour movement itself.

## THE MACRO-ECONOMIC REMIX

Now that the boom is over, and we move to grapple with the financial alchemy and paths that led to recession, it's easy to forgo attempts to understand the remarkable transition this generation saw, never mind their effects upon Irish trade unions.

For Ireland, these changes were marked profoundly when we woke to find ourselves in pole position on a 'globalisation index' in the US Foreign Policy magazine in 2001. Since the late sixties, Irish economic policy strongly relied on foreign multinationals for industrial investment. By 1999 the country attracted up to one quarter of all US direct investment for the EU with a total of over 1,000 multinationals employing over 100,000 people in areas as varied as electronics, software and pharmaceuticals [i]. Roughly three quarters of the manufacturing labour force is employed in multinationals and these organisations account for more than 80 per cent of exports from the country [ii].

## MYTHS OF THE BOOM

The 'Celtic Tiger' is celebrated in various hagiographical accounts as the result of a definitive break with tradition, an end to insular economic nationalism and a mature engagement with prevailing economic reality. This is seen as starting with Taoiseach Sean Lemass's implementation of the First Programme for Economic Expansion, which ended existing protectionist policies and began implementation of the now-characteristic generous tax breaks and grants for foreign firms setting up in Ireland.

A process of myth making, evident in works

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like Ray McSharry's *The Making of the Celtic Tiger*, celebrates the indigenous ingenuity of our elites. The introduction of free schooling, the adoption of cultural values associated with modernity; fiscal prudence; economic deregulation; low corporate taxation; industrial compromise and the efforts of the Industrial Development Authority (IDA) are all said to have paved the path way for strong foreign lead investment.

Lemass's argument that 'a rising tide lifts all boats' (not too far from the infamous 'trickle-down' theory of Reaganomics) typifies a prevalent understanding that ties together improvements in standards of living, economic growth and reliance on international investment in one seamless narrative.

Yet more critically engaged [iii] examinations of Ireland's economic renaissance contradict this prevailing chorus. Such critics home in on the significant role played by a turn around in the US economy after industrial restructuring and the move to investment in the high-tech sector from the seventies on.

This global backdrop to our rapidly changed Irish economy was made up of a significant shift from Fordist to post-Fordist models of production, including the break-up of vertically integrated manufacturing and the geographic dislocation of production, what has been called a 'spatial fix' for corporations seeking to evade local limitations on profit-accumulation.

Amidst this changing capitalism American high tech companies sought a beachhead into the significant European market. Ireland offered numerous advantages to such companies; with a low rate of corporation tax (10 per cent until 2002), Ireland undercut the rest of Europe in providing a young work force hireable at rates standing at the bottom of the EU.

A strong pro-business political climate developed, and broad acceptance of the government's economic strategy by the unions ensured a climate of relative industrial peace [iv].

One aspect of the growth tied to Foreign Direct Investment is reliance upon the performance of the parent economy, the dangers of which could first be seen in 2001, when the IDA announced record job losses in IT-based transnational corporations (TNC's) especially such symbols of the boom as Motorola and Gateway. This vulnerability is now deeply pronounced with many illustrations. Dell, a company once responsible for 5% of the Irish GDP, announced in January 2009 that it was to cut 1,900 jobs in its Limerick plant, relocating its production unit to Poland.

With its economy highly dependent on foreign investment, the Irish state found itself heavily tied into the economics of neoliberalism, expressed in an emphasis on integration into the European market via Nice and Lisbon, deregulation of the economy, the creation of a flexible labour market and the entrance into the market of previously exempt areas of life such as social housing and hospitals.

All this ties to a weakened vision of state function, as corporations wield the threat of relocation and disinvestment in response to economic decline, labour organisation or state intervention. A vision manifested locally in the failed regeneration projects of Dublin's public housing

projects and in the case of foreign companies with the government's inability to intervene during disputes like Waterford Crystal and SR Technics.

This process equally undermined the labour movement's ability to act as a 'major source of social cohesion and workers representation [v]' with, ultimately, the fate of multinational enterprises in Ireland determined in corporate board rooms, not through the wranglings of social partnership our de-clawed labour movement relies on to assert itself.

## THE ANTI UNION BUZZ GOES VIRAL

Multinationals hugely impeded the power of unions here, both through contributing to a broad anti-union ideology, and with the ghost of capital flight used to attack wage demands. Traditionally, multinationals were believed to conform to the existing industrial relations model in a host economy, however, since the adoption of a 'union neutral' stance by the IDA to entice multinational investment, this 'conformance thesis [vi]' was overturned with the emphasize now placed on how they re-defined our industrial relations patterns.

Firstly, the reliance on foreign investment enabled a 'non-union' approach to gain ground in the Irish host economy. This approach owed more to the political experience of years of US Reaganomics than the rhetoric of social partnership in Ireland, resulting in a sharp disparity between the Irish unions' approach to industrial relations and that of the new employers.

An overview of firms established at Greenfield sites in Ireland from 1987 to 1997 found that 65% of firms could be classified as non union [vii]. This was most prevalent amongst US companies which directly imported an American model of industrial relations, with only 14% recognizing unions compared with an 80% recognition rate among EU based companies [viii]. In 2007 Lower union density figures were reported amongst US MNCs where only 10 per cent of US MNCs have union density above 75 per cent [ix].

The vision of Ireland as a 'dynamic, inclusive knowledge economy' with employees amenable to 'workplace change and innovation,' meant American firms or franchises were less inclined to engage their workforces through representative bodies like unions [x].

There was a concurrent 'spill over' into indigenous firms, who increasingly adopted the innovations and market strategies of the multinational sector in an effort to remain competitive. As such, attitudes against union presence hardened across the board, but remained under-exposed due to the centralised bargaining of the Celtic Tiger period.

So, as the unions experimented with partnership from above, new human resource regimes that avoided dealing with unions were explored by the employers at the base.

## THE ERA OF FLEXIBILITY

Employers here were forced to adopt flexibility in order 'to adapt more speedily to turbulent and competitive international markets [xi].' Irish trade unions were equally happy to celebrate flexible working arrangements through the social partnership process. While multinational

investment contributed greatly to economic output and growth, it did not directly lead to increases in employment.

Since the mid 1990s more jobs were created in the services sector than in any other period. The phenomenon of increased flexibility is linked to significant shifts in the patterns of employment during the Celtic Tiger period, as the service sector came to dominate employment provision, accounting for 64% of jobs in 1999.

This steady transformation to a reliance on the services sector, with a move from full time to part time and other atypical modes facilitated the abandonment of traditionally desired full employment for the employment of a wider segment of the workforce in a greater number of temporary jobs. In the CSO second quarterly survey for 2007, 34.6% of full-time employees stated that they were members of a trade union, compared to just under 19% of part-time employees [xii].

It's all too obvious that contractual flexibility and short term work undermines the initiative to join a union, as the workplace is no longer a life time commitment and the once 'continuous association of labour [xiii]' that often formed the basis of a union becomes irrelevant as people move between different modes of employment.

In the UK, this temporal change in experiences of work and the increasing prevalence of shift work has been found to impact on union membership as the 'different times at which people work, mean that there is often no-one around to represent the union, and to recruit members [xiv]'

There, unions became a declining visible force on the proverbial 'shop floor' with a lack of union membership more a symptom of a lack of 'opportunity than of predisposition [xv].' The rise of the services sector and atypical employment sees 'a labour market in which trade union membership was strong replaced with one in which it was traditionally weak [xvi].

Thus, changes in capital's organisational dynamic led to new formations of class identity in the economy that were distinct from traditional, more homogeneous class structures, in these areas the unions find themselves floundering, with penetration as low as 23% in the private sector [xvii].

The unions are faced with the challenge of how to organise and represent new interest groups that make up the modern workplace [xviii]. 128,000 women entered the workforce between 1996 and 2000, into jobs which were once almost exclusively male but now have become deskilled and pushed down the status hierarchy. While the CSO Quarterly Household Survey for March to May 2007 found 65.9% of women were in unions compared to 66.7 per cent of men, [xix]. an Irish Congress of Trade Unions Joint Women's Committees Seminar held in 2009 saw a majority feel that unions needed to remove significant barriers to women's participation, and that this was affecting their unions "ability to respond to the wider social impact of the recession [xx]."

In Ireland, unions have had little success in the organisation of migrant workers, a group that throughout the Celtic Tiger represented a significant sector of a changed labour force; in 2002 between 40, 321 and 47,551 new work

"Of serious concern for the trade union movement is the low level of unionisation among young people"

[i] Gunnigle, McMahon and Fitzgerald. (1999) (eds) Industrial Relations In Ireland Theory and Practice, 2nd Edition, Gill and MacMillan. 404-405. [ii] [www.lrc.ie/documents/.../StrugglingToFollowTheHighRoad.pdf](http://www.lrc.ie/documents/.../StrugglingToFollowTheHighRoad.pdf) [iii] See Hearn, Denis. (1998) Inside The Celtic Tiger: The Irish Economy and The Asian Model, Pluto Press, UK. [iv] Allen, Kieran. (2000) The Celtic Tiger: The Myth of Social Partnership, Manchester University Press, Manchester.: 23 -27. [v] Castells, Manuel. (1997) The Information Age, Vol 2: The Power of Identity, Blackwell Oxford: 354 [vi] Roche,WK. and Geary, J. (1995) 'The Attenuation of 'Host-Country Effects? Multi-nationals, Industrial Relations and Collective Bargaining in Ireland.' Working Paper IR-HRM No 94-5 [vii] Roche, W. K. (2001) 'Accounting for the Trend in Union Recognition in Ireland', Industrial Relations Journal, 32, 1, pp37-54. [viii] [ix] <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/eiro/studies/TN0904049s/ie0904049q.htm> [x] Roche, WK & John F. Geary. (2000) 'Collaborative Production' and the Irish Boom: Work Organisation, Partnership and Direct Involvement in Irish Workplaces, The Economic and Social Review, Vol. 31, No. 1, January, pp. 1-36 [xi] Treu, T. (1992) "Labour flexibility in Europe", International Labour Review, Vol. 131 No. 4 , pp. 497-512. [xii] [http://www.cso.ie/releasespublications/documents/labour\\_market/current/qnhsunionmembership.pdf](http://www.cso.ie/releasespublications/documents/labour_market/current/qnhsunionmembership.pdf) [xiii] Webb, S. and Webb, B. (1894) The History of Trade Unionism Longman Green, London.: 1 [xiv] Croucher, R. & Brewster, C. (1998) 'Flexible working practices and the trade unions,' Employee Relations, Vol 20, Issue 5: 448 [xv] Stirling, John.( 2005) 'There's a new world somewhere: The rediscovery of trade unionism' Capital & Class, Autumn 2005, viewed 5 June 2006 <[http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_qa3780/is\\_200510/ai\\_n15716271](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3780/is_200510/ai_n15716271)> [xvi] Stirling, John.( 2005) 'There's a new world somewhere: The rediscovery of trade unionism' Capital & Class, Autumn 2005, viewed 5 June 2006 <[http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_qa3780/is\\_200510/ai\\_n15716271](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3780/is_200510/ai_n15716271)> [xvii] O'Connell et al. 'The Changing Workplace: A Survey of Employee's Views and Experiences' Forum on the Workplace Research Series, number 2. p70 [xviii] <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/eiro/2005/10/feature/ie0510201f.htm> [xix] [http://www.cso.ie/releasespublications/documents/labour\\_market/current/qnhsunionmembership.pdf](http://www.cso.ie/releasespublications/documents/labour_market/current/qnhsunionmembership.pdf) [xx] [www.ictu.ie/.../doc/ictu\\_women\\_and\\_recession\\_seminar\\_report1.doc](http://www.ictu.ie/.../doc/ictu_women_and_recession_seminar_report1.doc) [xxi] [http://www.lrc.ie/documents/publications/lrcsurveysreviews/Migrant\\_Workers\\_Study.pdf](http://www.lrc.ie/documents/publications/lrcsurveysreviews/Migrant_Workers_Study.pdf) P16 [xxii] <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/eiro/2005/10/feature/ie0510201f.htm> [xxiii] Drudy, P & Punch, M. (2000) 'Economic restructuring, urban change and regeneration: the case of Dublin,' Journal of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland, 29. pp 155-212.

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permits were granted to employees from outside the EU. In 2002 where disputes arose and were brought before a Rights Commioner, 80% of immigrants were self represented. The majority with representation were represented by a trade union official, however, this was significantly outstripped with the opening of the Migrants Rights Centre in 2003, which accounted for 43% of all representation in that year [xxi].

Of serious concern for the trade union movement is the low level of unionisation among young people across the labour market as a whole: 8.1% in the 15-19 age group, 21.7% in the 20-24 age group and 29.5% in the 25-34 age group [xxii].

The dramatic contraction of the construction industry due to the implosion of the property bubble, has a knock-on effect in industries such as retail, longer dole queues, will of course affect the union movement too. Periods of labour market 'tightness' limit the ability of employers to retaliate to unionisation drives, while on the other hand our current high unemployment threatens the union movement's ability to act, as workers become replaceable, and emotions move from dissatisfaction with the work experience to "being lucky to have a job at all."

#### WEDDED TO CONSUMPTION & COMPETITION

A strong trade union culture, springs from a wide class affinity. Sharp changes in the Irish economy brought dislocation and distortion in the way people identified and regarded themselves in the wake of the Celtic Tiger. There's much research showing how labour force and economic restructuring impacted on traditional working class communities [xxii], with the city becoming a locus of production, providing a technological infrastructure to the modern knowledge economy and pushing out traditional manufacturing it to its periphery echoing the global process of captialism's 'spatial fixes [xxiv].'

As it does this, it also pushes away and decomposes the traditional manufacturing working class so that it 'may find themselves in but not of the city, divorced from its new mainstream informational economy, and subsisting on a mélange of odd jobs, welfare cheques and the black economy [xxv].' On one hand, this leads to a considerable economic polarisation between social groups, and it can also uproot traditional union support bases.

The rise of a services industry dependent on high rates of consumption also led to a rise in consumer identity as a dominant mode of self-perception. Micheal O'Connel has charted modernisation under the Celtic Tiger and he describes a generation that moved beyond the "moral monopoly" of Catholic teaching into an individuality that articulated itself in the accumulation of material possessions rather than in personal fulfilment or involvement in collective practises such as unions.

There's a prevalent fatalistic notion of 'reality' and a belief system that privileges the 'new essentials' and consumer goods, that pushes the limits of personal finance to obtain them. This leads to a lack of control, with little view to social action as a cure for time poverty,

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# .....The Irish Anarchist Review

debt, financial insecurity or poor quality of life.

When this individualized mode of self-perception meets the job, we see a spill over of the globalization rat race into the arena of the personal, with a prevailing consensus amongst multinational employees and their unions that for 'Irish operations to remain viable, they must move up their corporation's 'value chain', through engaging in higher value added activities, and concurrently improve their competitiveness [xxvi].'

In effect these moves puts limits on the space for the critical reflection needed to open the possibilities that there is an alternative way of organising society outside competition through forces like unions.

## THE COMPACT WITH REALITY

Another common theme identified by analysts of union decline is the end of any claim among the labour movement to a radically, transformative vision of society that can transcend capitalism through collective action.

Conservative industrial relations correspondents present this change as a simple narrative, where the labour movement comes to maturity, leaving behind conflict, as a set of industrial rules and pluralist industrial relations strategies evolve, with each side coming to recognise each other's shared interest in the labour process.

This simple morality tale obscures as much as it reveals, and writers such as Kieran Allen have done some useful work to investigate the decline of a critical unionism within changing ideological schemas.

One easily perceived shift is in the language used in labour movement briefing documents before the crisis, where terms such as 'movement', "with its connotations of solidarity and common struggle, of a march towards a better society [xxvii]' became for a time redundant, indicating a shift in consciousness from "the clenched fist of confrontation to the open hand of co-operation."

The national tri-partite agreements under social partnership entailed a wide spread deregulation of virtually all aspects of the economy except in wages, with the unions participating in the National Competitive Council, described by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) as promoting 'increased competition in energy, telecommunications, transport and many other areas [xxviii].'

The alternate model that unions propose is similarly limited, as they tend to oppose a European social model to American neo-liberalism. As well as being an abandonment of traditional proletarian internationalism in favour of embracing fortress Europe, this signals their 'mature' willingness to manage the imposition of a work discipline suited to market environments.

While rightly demanding the enshrining of rights like collective bargaining<sup>xii</sup>, the union movement here for the most part skims over rather than challenges the creeping privatisation and flexibility buried in treaties like Nice and Lisbon, even though such moves contain the potential to overwhelm the last bastions of unionisation in the public sector or dramatically undermine those vestiges of social goods in existence.

Describing how the Irish Congress of Trade Unions' (ICTU) influence at government level is

in inverse proportion to its strength in the workplace, Allen focuses on the increased alienation of the union bureaucracy from the rank and file.

In the social partnership agreements he sees a process of deliberate co-option by a state that has, since the 1950's, showed an active interest in shaping trade unions to the interest of capital.

This is most evident in its encouragement of centralised bargaining, the rationalisation of the union movement and the introduction of the Industrial Relations Act in 1990, which limits the repertoire of legally permissible solidarity actions, eroding the scope for rank and file union participation.

While neo-corporatist practices in larger workplaces might have done little to alienate lay activists from union participation, the notion of the "displaced activist" is most salient among union members working in smaller firms or in atypical work, where there was little contact with the process of centralised bargaining, no tradition of shopfloor meetings or genuine contact with union structures or practices.

Arising in parallel to this lack of involvement in the unions' collective structure there has been an individualisation of class struggle, as service-providing unions take up the individual cases of members in order to "defend their legal rights as citizens [xxix]." A move that signifies a departure from relying upon the practice of collective workers power to reliance on state structures for dispute resolution.

For the labour movement, this amounted to entering into a compact with the Irish state and business leaders, accepting many core values, and closing the space available to radical critiques of Irish society and limiting the terrain of collective action.

The idea of working class power and a liberation based around that identity has, historically, been a major factor in mobilising and building organisations, but now, as Silver argues, the very idea 'that there is no alternative has had a powerful demobilising impact on labour movements [xxx].'

## SO WHAT SURPRISE MARCH 30TH

Last year in this lack of an alternative vision articulated itself in the run up to March 30th, with the rush of ICTU leadership to get back to the tables of power and the inability of the unions to act as a point where anger could catalyse in an organised manner. Given so much of the above, that no movement emerged that could go beyond the union leadership around that day of action belies the deeper problem we face, that of honestly appraising the state of the working class movement in Ireland and trying to etch out strategies to re-vitalise it's future.

The left was spread thin, existing for years without ever building structures that can organise across the unions and outside of their own networks. The dismal turn out for the Grassroots Unite open air rally in late May brought this in to further sharp relief.

On another level entirely, the unions themselves exist at a remove from the experiences of many members, attested to by so many personal accounts of unanswered join request phone calls and workplace disinterest in March 30th. It's only fair to read fatalism into much of this argumentation, but rather the intention is to throw some things into relief, and then find ways of moving beyond

the fragments of what exists to open a conversation on a path out of impasse towards labour movement renewal.

## HELLO SOCIETY

In late 1995, France was gripped by strikes engaged in by around five million workers over cuts to the minimum wage, welfare, health, education and the public service. Despite severe disruptions to public services and utilities, this strike wave crystallized a massive degree of public support because it was seen as a necessary action in defence of public goods or the social wage serving the whole of society, its a mobilisation that could be a useful reference for where we find our selves today. In commenting on it, Pierre Bourdieu described how French unions 'in a rough and confused form ... outlined a genuine project for a society, collectively affirmed and capable of being put forward against what is being imposed by the dominant politics [xxxi].'

The struggle to have the unions to take on a more transformative critique of society is vital if the Irish labour movement is to be capable of creating the swell of support that would make similar mobilisations here possible. The militant summit hopping that confronted the spectacle of capitalist power allowed the social movement emerging after Seattle to carve out a space for itself in contesting globalisation, proving an attractive political space to a whole generation, and contributing to the movement's growth.

There may be some lessons from that, trade unions too need to carve out a space for themselves in confronting the dynamics of power and recession in workplaces. To do this, they need to sharply differentiate themselves from their behaviour during the years of partnership, if they are ever to attract layers of people to them. Clear alternatives, less muddled calls to action, more spaces for engagement and reaching out to form alliances with community and social movement groups could be a start. Obviously, for a start the public sector unions need to provide shelter and space for actions that can strengthen the resolve and confidence of those in weaker areas. Of course, to do so needs these unions to begin addressing the interest of the general class, rather than the individual sectors they represent

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[xxiv] Silver, Beverly J. (2003) Forces of Labour. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. [xxv] Hall, Peter. (1996) 'Cities of tomorrow: an intellectual history of urban planning and design in the twentieth century,' Blackwell, Oxford. P 422 [xxvi] Clark, I. Almond. P. Gunnigle P. & Wachter, H. (2005) 'The Americanisation of the European business system?' Industrial Relations Journal 36.6, p513 [xxvii] Allen, Kieran. (2000) The Celtic Tiger: The Myth of Social Partnership, Manchester University Press, Manchester. p103 [xxviii] OECD, Regulatory Reform In Ireland. (Paris OECD, p2001) p27 [xxix] Bagguley, P. 'The Individualisation of Class Struggle,' Leeds Sociology Department, viewed 9 July, 2006 <<http://www.leeds.ac.uk/sociology/people/pbdocs/Individ%2520Class%2520Struggle.doc>> [xxx] Silver, Beverly J. (2003) Forces of Labour. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. p16 [xxxi] Bourdieu, P. 1998. Acts of Resistance. Against the New Myths of Our Time, Polity Press, Cambridge pp 52-53. [xxxii] Waterman, Peter. (2002) 'From 'Decent Work' to 'The Liberation of Time from Work' Reflections on Work, Emancipation, Utopia and the Global Justice and Solidarity Movement', Interactivist Exchange, viewed 5th July, 2006, <<http://info.interactivist.net/article.pl?sid=05/03/24/170247>> p202



The recent mobilisations by the SIPTU Community Branch prove a useful illustration of how trade unions here can mobilise far outside their organisational base in workplaces. They did it by providing an organisational framework where disparate but large communities of interest can gather, using the union as a tool to articulate grievances that in some cases lie in workplaces, but in many outside them.

Developing such mechanisms elsewhere for those suffering under this recession would be a valuable contribution from the unions to developing a culture where they are not left to act alone, but have the support and consent of large numbers of people that may not be directly involved, but see the movement as a vital force for justice. On an elementary level, we can say that this is the case with general strikes on the continent in countries like France, Italy or Spain, where despite having lower unionisation rates, the movement is far more potent due to the cultures of solidarity they fostered historically.

### A NEW MYTHIC SOLIDARITY

A solid class movement is based on the emergence of a shared identity around which solidarity is expressed and mobilised. Apart from some atypical moments, this has been historically weak here, and would have been even more chipped away at with the emergence of a heterogeneous work experience, changes in perceptions of class, and wedges driven between private and public sector workers. So, in one way, the current crisis of trade unionism is a crisis of a particular model of mobilisation, one which can be said to be based on what Richard Hymann calls 'mechanical solidarity' associated with images of either a homogeneous class experience or narrow sectoral interests.

Clearly, any project of labour renewal will involve significant drives to overcome the individualisation prevalent in areas of organisational weakness such as the service industry. This has to involve surpassing a narrow understanding of what it is to be 'working class' with its 'privileging of the traditional wage worker [xxxii].' towards constructing an expression of class that can accommodate and take seriously the fractured experiences of labour market flexibility and its diverse composition.

This is the rather fundamental work of making class and union politics relevant, and it requires step-

ping outside rhetoric that talks about a heavily objectified working class that excludes rather than includes. It means developing a new mythic or organic solidarity that people can share in. By clinging to a far too often simple language of "bosses and workers" on the left, or the stiff sectorial formalism of craft unions, we push aside the important work of developing a combative identity that fits our times, of exploring new class organization and alliances, cultural forms or modes of action that can contribute to an understanding of the labour movement as a tapestry. Something composed of different organisations, identities and forms that share solidarity in order to advance their unique interests. How best to do this is not easily answered, but closing our eyes to experimentation or possible "fellow travellers" certainly serves no use.

### A LABOUR CULTURE

There's a need to close the generation gap among trade union activists, to pass on knowledge on trade union organising. This requires looking at how our movements can start to build frameworks of affinity and environments where our democratic critique of work can be translated into effective instruments of solidarity and conflict at the job.

One thing that will be increasingly important in this regard is the intervention of non-union political and social entities to maintain and develop traditions of fighting unionism. This was best illustrated in the GAMA dispute, when the Socialist Party facilitated a wholly immigrant and deeply marginalised workforce in reaching out to existing union traditions here to fight for their workplace rights. Again, it has been seen on many other occasions through support groups that worked alongside recent worker struggles in this country and abroad. Given the difficulties of turning the IWU into something beyond a service providing union, the creation of such non-union entities that aren't wedded to any particular sect but genuinely playing a role in cross pollinating solidarity will be an important question for the years to come.

### UNION SPACES

Just as unions need to become rooted in the oppositional sub-cultures prevalent in workplaces in order to overcome being viewed as a presence alien to the daily experiences and concerns of workers, they also need to begin to understand the importance of carving out autonomous spheres for the employee

class against corporate management outside of the workplace.

Such union-sponsored spaces play a key role in keeping alive traditions of unionisation in a city, incubating them in times of decline and transmitting them to new arenas as the class shifts and shapes.

This is the experience of union halls in cities like Hamilton and Toronto, or the experience of workers and migrant action centres that organise communities outside of work, to strengthen their hand at the job - witness the migrant mobilisations in the US some years ago.

It's important to try eek out what our small movements can do to foster a culture of organised labour and solidarity, if we look within the movement, areas are opening that could contribute to consciousness raising at least. As this issue's interview with Alex Foti highlights, social spaces, be it Seomra Spraoi, Connolly Books or the Teachers Club can begin to contribute to a broader "working class counter-culture," through providing zones where people can continuously gather outside the patchwork experiences of work. While the suggestion may be pushing it, we can certainly see some parallels with Working-men's Clubs of the Irish and British labour movements in this tradition.

It's important that the unions begin to develop a "union culture", making efforts to embed their members in a sense of involvement with a project broader than just merely paying dues or falling back on officials at the last moment when a dispute arises. The unions should strive to be part of our lives, culturally, socially and politically - aiming to develop a movement that addresses the whole human not just the alienated being that sits at the till for 8 hours a day.

### CONCLUSION

As a movement, the libertarian left is more capable than others of offering a modern narrative of struggle, one that doesn't haggle over the bones of labour martyrs, but can look to them with the same eye for inspiration that we do Oaxacca or the powerful student and labour organising of No Sweat, the classic IWW or the recent migrant Maydays in the states. Our tradition is that of a social movement, and anarchism is a strategy that can enable our class to win rather than a philosophy wedded to images and tactics from the past. The libertarian milieu represents something of an odd melange of possibilities, more than any other segment of the Irish left we contain the hints of something that could be said to be a class movement that recognises people for their whole self, and not just their economic moment. This holistic view of the human as more than a labourer, and our own existence as a zone of working class experimentation means we have an important role to play in seriously thinking about where we are going as both a union and class movement.



# //////////////////book review/



## The IWW and The Making of a Revolutionary Working Class Counter culture

*Paperback. Charles H Kerr (2003)*

A number of years ago Franklin Rosemont, Illinois based and a wobbly red card carrier himself, carved out a massive slab of social history called Joe Hill: The IWW and the Making of a Revolutionary Working Class Counterculture contributing to the mythology of the IWW that haunts the imagination of so many radicals.

Whatever about an unfortunately dated show-card cover – inside there's a breathtaking orgy for the mind of the contrary worker. So with that said, you are probably expecting a short biography of Joe Hill disguised as a review, and with good reason.

Hill's background was Swedish, he emigrated to the states and laboured in the San Pedro docks and became involved in the IWW there; leading him to furore into Mexico "under the Red Flag" of it's revolution and later to travel to Canada to support the 1912 Fraser River railroad strike.

And of course along the way he knocked off a dozen or so labour movement standards in strike camps across the country, songs that'd eventually make their way across the Atlantic to our own pubs with time. Towards the end of 1915, he was fitted up as a "stick up man" in

Salt Lake City for the murder of an ex-cop.

So from the start Rosemont is forced to build his Hill narrative from "an armful of solid facts, some strong possibilities, and a bedraggled suitcase of educated guesses" - apart from some oral histories and letters passed down, there wasn't much to sketch his life from.

An old wobbly, Richard Brazier, who matched Hill's traits of song and migratory labour, summed up the biographical problem facing Rosemont rather neatly: "we wobblies were very restless men and, as we were mostly migratory workers, were on the move continually...Most of us were only concerned with the present, and our origins and pasts were seldom talked about."

What's been left to float down the stream of history to us about Hill is mostly legend. Myths themselves exert a mobilising passion on us but to learn from history, as Rosemont's wants us to, requires clear cutting through any approach that hoists Hill up as another "superman, saint and saviour" or an almost comic book like abnormal "proletarian super hero."

These popular caricatures of Hill as "labour's supreme organiser" imply a herding of the masses, and are deeply antithetical to the every day wobbly disdain, Hill's own included, for them ordering us from above. As the author points out, this hagiography writing arose from the Stalinist cultural tradition's attempt to integrate Hill into their political pantheon, much like how our lot squabble over the bones of Connolly.

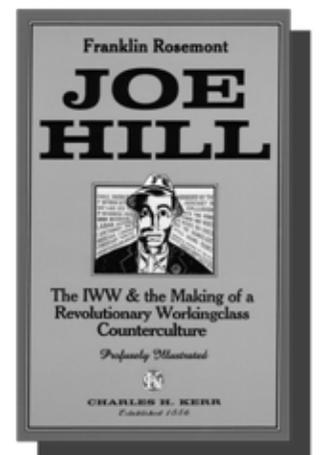
The book can be read in a number of ways; on one hand it rescues the IWW from Stalinist critics that fashionably flounced after Russian Bolshevism; it gives insight to the politics and personalities of the union itself and rescues Hill the man. But as suggested by the subtitle, it's Rosemont's treatment of how the IWW built a counter hegemonic working class culture that is the most interesting facet of this brick thick work.

Hill's life path becomes a tool for Rosemont, a scaffolding around which to thread an exami-

### Dig It Out!



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nation of the wider wobbly milieu and the culture it generated. From this angle he quickly sketches the IWW as a deeply indigenous radical traditional, both uniquely American and working class: spawned from the melting pot of immigration, where democratic ideals flirted with European socialisms and a heavy refusal of the dogmatism prevalent among the early American left.

Born in an era of capitalistic expansion and the brute pitting of class interest against class interest in dusty company towns, places where the mediation of a welfare state was an idlers dream; the wobblies argued that the self-organisation of working people against exploitation, to provide themselves a means to life, required, direct, rather than later action. One cartoon bluntly puts it: a migratory worker chases a pork chop being waved by Lady Liberty while a shop keeper, under a sign engraved "working man's friend," shouts from his porch: "Hey lad! Why don't you stay in one place and vote the socialist ticket?"

Rosemont places huge importance on everyday collective intellectualism, a practice he finds uniquely special to the early wobblies. From the vantage of the 1970's, Fred Thompson, an IWW old timer in Chicago, reminisced about the "marxism in overalls of his youth," how his fellow wobs used theory as a method of getting at reality. Resisting divisions into intellectuals and activists, Wobs met through study groups and in workers colleges, being both familiar with the exploitative character of work from theory and experience, they ribbed in iconoclastic songs about old "Karl Marx's Whiskers."

The alternative to is presented in a cartoon from One Big Union Monthly called The Ass in the Lion's Skin. The American Communist Party, or the Comical Party as the Wobs had it, pops up as a Frankenstein's monster – not patched together from those dispossessed by a modernizing capital, but hewn from poorly digested ideologues, a clumsy vaudeville villian, wearing Lienknecht's hat, Lenin's coat and Gorky's hair and totally alien to the experiences of American workers.

We all know the IWW was a union movement, but Rosemonts focus bends more towards it as a social movement of class, with its union halls evoking parallel principles for how culture and society could take shape once the shell of capital was cracked. This culture was important to the IWW, both as a method of leaving organisational stains in workplaces constantly washed over with high turnovers, and to spread politics in a lightning fast, almost viral manner.

It made use of the social technologies of working class people during the period and its philosophy of disobedience was carried as much on the informal rail road of migratory ho-bo's travelling through the circuits of capital from harvest to dock than through it's official publications.

In 1914 a Californian economist Carleton Parker surveyed eight hundred casual labourers, noting half were familiar with the Wobbly programme: "where a group of hobo's sit around a fire under a rail way bridge many of the group can sing IWW songs without the book. This was not so three years ago."

Much has been written on the failings of the IWW, but its real success was contributing a tense residue of emerging ideology of class power to American popular culture, one that accompanied and flanked their organising, hammering away in song that "if the workers took a notion, every

mine and every mill, will at their command stand still" as well as organising shops.

Rosemont makes clear how other organisations of the left published papers to be consumed by workers reaching into libraries for pre-cast models straight off the assembly line as it were. Taking a different approach, the Wobblies put out material by pissed off workers and for other bored workers. Their writings were quirked with the consequences of alienation, often spilling over into a romantic vision and a poetry that could animate their struggles through immense criticism of life as lived.

Just because they'd become radicalised, they refused to think themselves out of their class. So, within the IWW literature he presents, class isn't talked about just in theoretical terms. It was given the nuance of different characters and contemporary behaviors, creating a point of identification for the reader and birthing the social actors that could carry out the great Wobbly liberation.

On the other side of the great Wobbly class divide we have the masters and their Pinkerton detectives, "sky pilot" clergy and most famously of all, illustrated in the form of Mr Blockhead, the sniveling work place fool that buys just about everything the boss has to tell him.

The book could equally serves as perfect coffee table fodder with pages and pages of simple yet gorgeous humorous art leaving you reeling with thoughts of how impoverished our contemporary movement is despite the reign of knock off Photo-shop copies.

The first generations of Wobs used silent agitators - stickers stuck prominently around workplaces, in a technique scammed from the hobo habit of leaving marks on safe places, or near their camps. Many echo contemporary abducts. One has the stripes of the American flag replaced with lines accounting for patriot driven anti-radical legislation, and another has the HMV dog listening to his masters voice crackle "be concentrated, work hard!"

Card games were used to illustrate anti-capitalist economics too, simple graphics dotting the IWW's politics around the deck. Missing a Mister Block cartoon, an early paper even carried a joke futurist etching of a square to represent that common arselick.

Their habit of soap boxing of course was a very immediate form of communication, utilizing talented story tellers and orators that cleverly used manufactured folklore to emphasize, for example, anti-racist solidarities such as the origins of the IWW "wobbly" pronunciation from a Chinese chief and other ways to push back capital. One such character, Jack Phelan known as the "silver tongued boy orator," fought in Mexico like Hill, and always stood up, with an umbrella over his head whatever the weather, and let roar "help, help I'm being robbed!" Once a crowd gathered he'd launch into: "I'm being robbed by the master class" in an intriguing mashing of performance art into radical street rhetoric.

Many of the classic IWW songs, such as "Long Haired Preacher" were parodies of Salvation Army hymns, an organisation union soap boxers battled with for street corner space before speaking from the stoop. Often banned by the local judiciary, leading to mass jailings as more and more ploughed into towns like Spokane to take the place of the busted.

Its possible to be critical of Rosemont, letting his own words bite back against him, he describes one of his tangential paths from Hill a "digressive and admittedly speculative discussion." And some of it really is.

Rosemont ends up seeking the Wobbly spirit in the world of the culturally hip, from surrealism to beat poetry, and by pleading to the images of these later sub culture rather than seeking out class counter cultures he veers way off. None of this denies the books stature as a worthy contribution in the absence of a more controlled and schematic approach to the autonomous counter culture bred by the IWW.

The book doesn't really focus too much on why the IWW collapsed. Though the vicious anti-red repression and foreigner hysteria; how it was stamped into the ground and politically ruptured by others on the left during the twenties does get a look in. Maybe Rosemont saw little point poking around the corpse of the wobbly movement?

If the almost "what if" banter of the biographical aspect is a failing, the real value of Rosemont is read between the lines; how he smacks down ahistorical visions of working class culture. Asking us to look at what we have around us, what oddities and networks are already out there piercing through the shell that we can give revolutionary definition to, along lines suggested by Piet Mondrian, creating "images of what society must one day make a reality."

Here's where such social history is a viagara to the impotence of thought put into revitalising our radical labour movements. The radical cultural utopianism incubated and informing the IWW's working class horizontalism, bred a movement that could sit alongside the daily lives of workers where an old time crafts unionism couldn't, allowing them to express their dreams beyond work and build organizations relevant to the structural forms of employment foisted on them by a shifting capitalism.

That's an organisational form we are starved of today and a pattern of resistance our own constantly moving service industry and out-sourced hobo's could well do with. Pick up Rosemont if you want to look back for inspiration to push ourselves forward, not if you want to salivate over the wistful obscurity of history or write photo-copied odes to dead movements.



# //////book review/



## Checkout: Life On The Tills

REVIEW: ED WALSH

"Anna Sam", as you might guess, is a pseudonym, the handle of a French blogger who decided to put her years behind the till to good use on a website describing the day-to-day experience of supermarket workers in all its tedious glory. In a way it's refreshing to discover that the psychology of the checkout girl / boy appears to be the same wherever you go - my own days at Centra and the like are well imprinted on the brain, but they could have been an atypical reflection of my general misanthropy, grumpiness and ill will towards the rest of the species. But Anna reports more or less the same irritations - the only difference being that, on account of her gender, she must also bat away the sleazy or sheepish advances of French manhood on a daily basis.

Many of her observations will prompt a smile of recognition from anyone who has done this kind of work. To begin with, you have the ludicrous ritual of the McJob interview, with the standard "Why do you want to work with us?" question. She runs through a list of possible answers: "Because I always dreamed of working behind a till" is difficult to say with enough conviction and enthusiasm, but if you tell them "I need a job to live" you will be marked down for "not being motivated" or "lacking team spirit". One of the main French supermarket chains is called Champion - apparently it goes down a treat with them if you say "I want to be a champion!", although it wouldn't work so well with their rival Carrefour ("I want to be a crossroads!" would just sound weird).

Anna gives a good breakdown of the irregularity of working hours which rules out any

kind of normal family life for staff. One standard week, she reports, involves the following schedule: Monday - 9 - 2.30 (16 minutes break), Tuesday - day off, Wednesday - 3 - 8.45 (17 minutes break), Thursday - 1.45 - 5.15 (9 minutes break), Friday - 3.15 - 9 (17 minutes break), Saturday - 9 - 1 / 3.30 - 9.15 (12 minutes break / 17 minutes break). And then a completely different timetable the following week, prepared anything between 15 days and 24 hours in advance (Sunday doesn't make an appearance on that list, because the French still have a civilised aversion to opening on the day which the Good Lord established for those recovering from hangovers).

In general, though, the blog entries / chapters concentrate on the foibles of customers, not the iniquities of the employer. This is also pretty accurate as I remember it - there's only a handful of grievances you can level at the company that hires you (not enough pay / too many hours / shit breaks / rubbish music on repeat hour after hour) but the things customers do to irritate you are almost inexhaustibly varied. The introduction of the plastic bag tariff has introduced a new one since my barcode-scanning days, apparently - Anna recounts the daily stand-off with customers who pay by credit card, then suddenly demand a fistful of bags after punching in their code and lose the rag when they are reminded that you have to pay for the buggers nowadays. Some things don't change, though - the stray customers who insist on hanging around well after closing time so they can get a few more cakes are a particular source of annoyance (I was on the pig's back when I had a job that left me in charge of shutting up shop for the night - if there was anybody still there at five to eleven they'd be chased off with a bout of aggressive Hoovering around their feet).

This book is an easy read, but it would probably be more enjoyable in its original format, as a short blog entry to be digested every couple of days - once you start reading the chapters one after one for a few hours at a time, it gets to be a bit repetitive (you can find the original blog, boasting 13 million hits when I last checked, at [\[tur.over-blog.com/\]\(http://tur.over-blog.com/\)\). This is a cyber-genre that I'd like to see take off in Ireland - the nature of that kind of work makes traditional forms of collective action like forming a union very difficult, so a few blogs could help people generate a bit of common purpose or at least common thinking among workers in this end of the economy. It'd be a good start just to have some more information about people's experiences of casual work in the retail](http://caissierenofu-</a></p></div>
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trade.

Of course, for all I know there already are a rake load of blogs just like that, but they're a closed book to me because I don't speak Chinese or Polish. I'd love to see a similar account by one of the Chinese guys who work in 24-hour garages (another thing they don't really have in France). Anna's chronicles of everyday idiocy surely wouldn't hold a candle to the gormless antics of Ireland's nocturnal shoppers.



## Dig It Out!

Title: Checkout: A Life On The Tills.

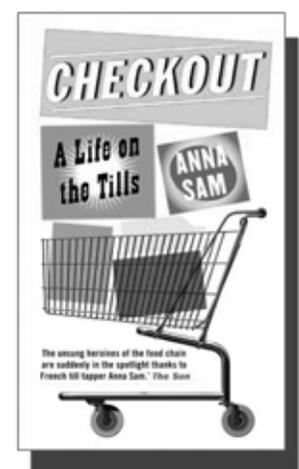
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# ATM

- BREAD RENT
- MILK LECKY
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