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State collusion with employers dilutes employees' rights

THE EU directive on information and consultation for employees was first raised by the European Commission in 1995 and was then formally launched as a legislative proposal in 1998. The directive formally became EU law in March 2002.

However, the final Irish legislation was not transposed until 2006. Of interest is the fact that the Irish legislation was not agreed under "social partnership," and there is now no mention of it in *Towards 2016.* Instead, the Government took submissions from various groups and then drafted the legislation. The resulting Employees (Provision of Information and Consultation) Act (2006) is widely viewed as a minimalist transposition of the EU directive. In particular, information and consultation rights are not automatic: 10 per cent of the work force must apply to "trigger" them, unless an employer voluntarily concedes. (See *Socialist Voice,* June 2006.)

Recent research undertaken at NUI, Galway, into the transposition of the directive, however, finds that the Government, acting in collusion with employers' associations and state development agencies, worked behind the scenes from 1998 to ensure that the law would placate international investors. The Irish Congress of Trade Unions was excluded from this process.

The entire purpose of this exercise was to reformulate the Employee Information and Consultation Directive so that the legislation would not impinge upon the interests or prerogatives of managements.

An indication of this is how Intel lobbied and met the Government on several occasions, suggesting numerous amendments to the legislation. The central message being articulated by US transnationals and their representatives was that inward investment would be significantly affected if such a "bad" piece of legislation ended up on the statute book.

"It will not help the partnership process if the extent of opposition was publicly known."

Of course there is a certain paradox in this, in that unions themselves were uncertain whether the legislation would be an opportunity to open up vistas of influence in non-union firms or a threat, as a form of union substitution by employers.

Notably, however, employers and the Government were concerned that nothing in the directive would *"cut across HRM [human resources management] practices of the Irish operations of US multinationals and thus damage FDI [foreign direct investment]."* (Source: Department of Foreign Affairs, 1998.) An undated report by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment revealed that the Government was "uncompromisingly" opposed to the directive from the beginning and sought a text that "permits us to do our own thing." This report claims that the text the Government wanted was a weakened version, with significant changes that would appease the FDI lobby.

The report summed up the Government's strategy for dealing with enquiries on the topic by saying that they were *"kicked into touch; ditto on parliamentary questions,"* which *"has helped limit discussion."*

Before the publication of the draft

In this issue

> "The world has tired of American hegemony and has had its fill of American arrogance. America's reputation is in tatters: the financial debacle, endless red ink, Abu Ghraib, Gitmo [Guantánamo], rendition, torture, illegal wars based on lies and deception, disrespect for the sovereignty of other countries, war crimes, disregard for international law and the Geneva Conventions, the assault on habeas corpus and the separation of powers, a domestic police state, constant interference in the internal affairs of other countries, boundless hypocrisy.
>
> The change that is coming is the end of American empire. The hegemon has run out of money and influence. Obama as "America's First Black President" will lift hopes and, thus, allow the act to be carried on a little longer. But the New American Century is already over.—**Paul Craig Roberts** (former Assistant Secretary of the Treasury, former associate editor of the *Wall Street Journal*), *Counterpunch,* 10 November 2008"

EU directive, the Government urged that action be taken to contact the president of the European Commission and the Social Affairs Commissioner of the time; a handwritten internal note states that *"there is good reason for contacts now with Commissioner Flynn and President Santer to advise prudence in relation to the proposed measures."*

In the month before the publication of the draft directive an option was proposed to the Secretary-General of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, which was *"to make clear representation to Commissioner Flynn that an initiative would not be helpful particularly as regards FDI. But bear in mind that the Commissioner already knows this; that it may emerge later that the Irish government made such overtures and that this will not help the partnership process."*

Later in the same document the view is again expressed that it *"will not help the partnership process, if the extent of opposition was publicly known."*

In the light of this, the Government sought policy amendments to the directive in private while at the same time publicly promoting "partnership" at the company level.

Later correspondence by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment from 2001 reveals that the Government, in alliance with the governments of other countries, claimed to have secured *"key concessions on the content of the Directive in 2001 as relayed in meetings with employer groups."* Among these are: *"We have achieved some key improvements . . . a change from an absolute right being conferred to a right which is only conferred when a group of workers elect to claim the right . . . the requirement for enterprises to report on the 'probable economic and financial situation' of enterprises has been replaced by 'probable economic situation' only. This reduces the level of financial reporting obligations in the Directive."*

This last point was specifically emphasised as a concern at a meeting between the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste and IBEC, at which it was stated that *"the culture of multinationals must be respected and that prior consultation on financial decisions was not acceptable."* Further meetings were held with the US Chamber of Commerce in Ireland, Intel, and the Irish Management Institute, with the Tánaiste frequently assuring a meeting with the management of six transnationals that the Government was on their side and noting, *"We have achieved some improvements."* Indeed, only days after political agreement was reached on the directive in 2001 the Tánaiste met Intel to update them on concessions that had been secured.

The frequency of meetings with employers' groups was in stark contrast to the number held between the department and the ICTU. The first was in 2003—almost four-and-a-half years after the directive was published. Indeed the department as far back as 2000 was aware that *"outright opposition will put the government in conflict with the ICTU."* Instead the Government pursued a strategy of *"no overt opposition . . . keeping a low profile at home."*

In summary, the report demonstrates the influence and power of FDI companies in Ireland and their influence on political structures. Indeed IBEC and other employers' groups had achieved considerable orientation of the contents of the bill long before the ICTU was asked for its views.

[NC]

"Global Europe": An open door for big-business lobbyists

IN 2006 the former EU Commissioner for External Trade, Peter Mandelson, launched "Global Europe," a new framework for trade policy that clearly gives priority to the interests of big business.

The European Commission, from the earliest stages of its design, has facilitated the unparalleled participation of industry in this strategy, particularly "Business Europe," which represents the interests of large corporations. Business Europe continues to be given privileged access to the Directorate-General for Trade as "Global Europe" is implemented, including the continuing negotiations on EU bilateral free-trade agreements.[1] And this month in Brussels, Business Europe will hold a conference entitled "Going Global: The Way Forward" in the Charlemagne Building, head office of the Directorate-General for Trade. This is a telling example of the European business organisation's close connections with the Commission.

What is the "Global Europe" strategy?

"What do we mean by external aspects of competitiveness? We mean ensuring that competitive European companies, supported by the right internal policies must be enabled to gain access to, and operate securely in world markets. That is our agenda."—Peter Mandelson, 18 September 2006.

Global Europe is a new framework for EU trade policy that covers several initiatives. Peter Mandelson has presented it as a trade policy contribution to the EU's Lisbon agenda for growth and jobs. The external agenda of Global Europe is a very aggressive push to dismantle "barriers," such as the social and environmental regulations that large EU corporations now have to comply with when entering new markets and gaining access to natural resources abroad. It plays on the fear that countries such as India, Brazil and China will prove more competitive than EU industry by imposing a trade policy that is entirely devoted to helping business become "more competitive" and more profitable.

It does not consider the impact on the development of other countries—whose governments will find that their choices are restricted when it comes to determining their own development model, protecting their environment, and even providing assistance to their people. It wants third countries to increase access to their markets, deregulating such areas as services, investment, public procurement, and competition policy, and enforcing tougher intellectual property rights, which will benefit European transnational companies, reopening the ambitious business agenda that proved too difficult to get through the WTO.

At the centre of the Global Europe strategy is a new generation of regional and bilateral free-trade agreements, abandoning the moratorium on such agreements introduced by the former Commissioner for External Trade, Pascal Lamy, in 1999.

Other elements of Global Europe include "market access partnerships," designed to tackle barriers to EU exports, a policy for gaining unlimited access to raw materials all over the world, as well as moves to redefine the European Union's trade relations with China and the United States.

The other side of the coin is the EU internal agenda, not generally considered to be the territory of trade policy. Here again the fear of so-called emerging economies and the threat they are said to pose to jobs and growth are used to push through measures within the European Union that could have wide-ranging effects.

More deregulation and liberalisation

Mandelson's agenda includes a review of the single market, further liberalisation to remove any restrictions preventing the expansion of corporations, and measures to match other countries' requests for the opening of EU markets. This could potentially expose every sector to more competition.

Global Europe reinforces what in Commission-speak is referred to as "better regulation," which is the need to subject every new EU regulation—including environmental and social rules—to an impact assessment that looks at its effect on the international competitiveness of European business. This makes it more difficult to adopt environmental or social regulations, as large corporations will argue that they will hamper their international competitiveness.

Global Europe also proposes that the European Union first look at what other "main competitors," mostly the United States, are doing before introducing new regulations so as to create "regulatory convergence." *"The greater the consistency in rules and practices with our main partners, the better for EU business."*[1] The Impact Assessment Report of Global Europe admits that those policies will hurt the more vulnerable in the European Union: *"the process of market opening . . . brings about transformations which are disruptive for some."*[2]

Joint drafting by big business and the Commission

It is not often that corporate lobby groups admit being so pleased with a piece of legislation. But in the case of Global Europe the input of big business—and not trade unions—was requested and was incorporated from the very early stages.

The origins of Global Europe date from the release in September 2005 by the Directorate-General for Trade of the "Issue Paper on Trade and Competitiveness,"[3] an analytical paper setting the scene, where the Commission set out in some fifty pages its ideas for a revised EU trade policy. While the Commission only consulted NGOs and trade unions at a "civil society dialogue" meeting on 8 March 2006, where business was also present,[4] the Directorate-General for Trade held a special consultation meeting for business federations, and several confidential meetings.[5]

The Directorate-General for Trade incorporated the reactions and demands of big business in the next draft of the paper, which by now was titled Global Europe.[6] This draft, dated 26 June 2006, was sent by the Directorate-General for Trade to Business Europe (formerly the Union of Industrial and Employers' Confederations of Europe) in January 2007. Business Europe was positive about the draft: *"Overall business is pleased with the substantial improvements in DG Trade's reflection on this issue."*

Parallel to this formal consultation process—which was already biased in favour of big business—several of the big-business lobby groups had meetings with Peter Mandelson and other senior officials at the Directorate-General for Trade to discuss Global Europe. Among these groups, Business Europe had by far the greatest access to officials. Other meetings covered other issues: for instance, hardly a month has passed in which Business Europe did not organise a meeting with Commission officials and World Trade Organisation negotiators on the WTO talks.[7]

At many of the meetings on Global Europe, UNICE or Business Europe acted as a hub for other corporate lobby groups. Regular participants included the European Services Forum, a group comprising large service corporations set up by a former Commissioner for External Trade, Leon Brittan, who is now a lobbyist for the London financial services industry; the European Chemical Industry Council, German industry, and the European Automobile Manufacturers' Association. In one of those meetings the Director-General for Trade, David O'Sullivan, stressed that there was an "open door policy for UNICE in DG Trade."[8]

Although Business Europe claims to be the voice of all business in Europe, big and small, it uses its substantial political weight to lobby for positions that favour big corporate players. The current president is Ernest-Antoine Seillière, heir to the Wendel empire (now an investment company) and former president of the Mouvement des Entreprises de France. Business Europe received €749,675 in funding from the Commission in 2007.[9]

Business Europe conference in EU offices

The doors of the Directorate-General for Trade are indeed open to Business Europe. The group held a conference on 28 October in the agency's offices to evaluate the first two years of Global Europe. Asked about its involvement, the Directorate-General for Trade denies any financial responsibility and says the event is Business Europe's. "The role of the European Commission is limited to suggesting to Business Europe names of Commission officials that could possibly intervene during the conference."[10]

According to the programme for "Going Global: The Way Forward," speakers at the one-day event included the Commissioner for Enterprise and Industry, Gunter Verheugen, the Commissioner for Development, Louis Michel, the Commissioner for Education, Jan Figel, the Director-General for External Trade, David O'Sullivan, the Deputy Director-General for External Trade, Karl-Friedrich Falkenberg, the Director-General for the Environment, Jos Delbeke, the Deputy Director-General for Enterprise and Industry, Françoise Le Bail, and the Deputy Director-General for Economic and Financial Affairs, Marco Buti. The former Commissioner for External Trade, Peter Mandelson, was replaced by the new commissioner, Catherine Ashton. A previous version of the programme included also the president of the European Commission, José Manuel Barroso, and the Commissioner for the Environment, Stavros Dimas.

With such a panel, it is more than an understatement to say that the role of the Commission is limited to suggesting names of Commission officials. And, despite denying any financing of the conference, the Commission subsidised it through the use of the Charlemagne Building. Renting such a space would cost thousands of euros, without even counting the political value of such an endorsement. In short, this event clearly reflects the links between Business Europe and the Commission on Global Europe, links that go beyond influence into joint policy-making.

Corporate fingerprints on "Global Europe"

"This is not a plan for competitiveness but a plan for exporting inequality and poverty."—Céline Charveriat, head of Oxfam's Make Trade Fair campaign, 4 October 2006.

The very privileged access enjoyed by Business Europe and other corporate interests throughout the drafting of Global Europe has resulted in a framework for EU trade policy that puts aside all other concerns in favour of EU big business. The 2005 issue paper on trade and competitiveness—the analytical basis of Global Europe—aired the possibility of lifting the moratorium on new bilateral and regional free-trade negotiations. That was the "Lamy doctrine," in operation since 1999 and designed to convey strong political support for the WTO negotiations.

The drive towards a bilateral trade agreement strategy was motivated by the lack of results achieved at the WTO. The Director-General for Trade, David O'Sullivan, shared the directorate's views in a meeting with many representatives of Business Europe as possible, "given the organisational set-up and the number of Members pushing for their quite heterogeneous interests." He graphically concluded that "the EU-US round days were over," referring to the stronger positioning of developing countries that no longer swallow the deals offered by the powerful North.

Adding pressure was the fact that the United States and other EU competitors had launched a bilateral free-trade agreement frenzy. Large EU corporations were worried that their major competitors would benefit, and this could have an impact on their market share. Big business had become frustrated with the lack of results at the WTO.

European businesses were enthusiastic about the proposed move towards bilateral free-trade agreements but felt that the issue paper was not strong enough about the sharp economic focus that those should have. "New negotiations should be clearly labelled as trade agreements and not be linked to parallel political cooperation accords," demanded Business Europe. "That will ensure that the EU approaches commercial negotiations with as strong a hand as possible."[11]

Most of the big-business lobby groups conveyed their wish list for a new generation of free-trade agreements in meetings with officials of the Directorate-General for Trade and through position statements and letters. One common demand was to identify the countries that would bring them more benefits, particularly the so-called emerging economies, such as Brazil, India, south-east Asia, and China.

The European Services Forum called on the European Union "to allocate adequately its resources in its bilateral trade strategy with a particular focus on the countries/regions with the highest growth potential and commercial opportunities for European business ahead of more general political cooperation agreements."[12]

To be continued.

■ Read more at Corporate Europe Observatory (www.corporateeurope.org).

Notes

1. European Commission, "Global Europe: Competing in the world," October 2006, at ec.europa.eu/trade/issues/sectoral/competitivenes s/global_europe_en.htm.
2. Commission staff working document, accompanying document to the communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, etc., in "Global Europe: Competing in the world: A contribution to the EU's growth and jobs strategy: Impact assessment report," Brussels, 4 October 2006, *SEC* (2006), 1228.
3. Trade and Competitiveness Issue Paper, Directorate-General of Trade, Brussels, 1 September 2005, *EB* (D), 2004.
4. The "civil society dialogue" (CSD) is an initiative established by the former Commissioner for External Trade, Pascal Lamy, for dealing with the massive public opposition at the time of the WTO summit meeting in Seattle in 1999. It brings together the Directorate-General of Trade and civil society (defined by the Commission as comprising NGOs, trade unions, and business), but its scope is very limited.
5. The "Impact Assessment Report of Global Europe" prepared by the Commission lists consultations with stakeholders. It mentions the meeting within the civil society dialogue, the meeting on 18 January 2006 for business groups, the consultations with member-states in the 133 Committee, and "consultations with UNICE between January and April 2006." Commission staff working document, "Global Europe: Competing in the world: A contribution to the EU's growth and jobs strategy: Impact assessment report," Brussels, 4 October 2006, *SEC* (2006), 1228.
6. "Global Europe: Competing in the world," draft 27/06/06, Directorate-General of Trade, Brussels, *EB* D (2006).
7. See www.businesseurope.eu/content/default.asp?PageId=433.
8. Report of meeting of 2 February 2006 between David O'Sullivan, Director-General of Trade, and Foreign Relations Committee of UNICE (attended by thirty-five directors of international relations from national members of UNICE, together with some heads of sectoral organisations).
9. ec.europa.eu/grants/search/index_en.htm.
10. Letter by Peter Klein, Directorate-General of Trade, 26 August 2008.
11. "UNICE strategy on an EU approach to free trade agreements," 7 December 2006.
12. "ESF position paper on EU free trade agreements," Brussels, 28 February 2007.

All quiet on the Government's front!

SINCE the Government's bail-out of the banks early in October with the Credit Institutions (Financial Support) Act (2008) we have seen little action—positive or negative—to address what began as a banking crisis but is clearly now a crisis of capital itself.

The overarching Government strategy, if one can be ascertained, appears to be a combination of "close your eyes and hope it's disappeared" and "if it hasn't, make the most vulnerable in society pay for it." The Minister for Finance, Brian Lenihan, recently said: "The recent Budget is a first step in restoring the public finances to sustainability while avoiding depressing economic growth further."

This was said several weeks after the budget had been exposed from many viewpoints as a most inept, confused, inaccurate, dishonest and cowardly attempt to deal with the current difficulties.

If this is a sign of where those leading the country are, be afraid; be very afraid!

Following the Financial Support Act we were to see a hard-hitting, difficult budget that would deal with the public finances, protect the most vulnerable, and restore consumers' and investors' confidence. This, we know, did not happen. Almost two months down the line the same CEOs and the same senior managements are running the banks—the ones that have done a great job of running them into the ground; the same regulatory, or lack of regulatory, system exists; and the same performance-related pay and target-based sales culture exists.

While this has remained the same, workers have lost their jobs, have seen their imposed market-based pensions greatly depleted, have seen their savings—often in the form of bank shares—disappear, and have been further penalised by the Government through the income levy, a levy that hit the low to middle-earners in real terms far more than the high-earners.

One action the Government have taken, even if weeks after it was planned, was to announce their twelve representatives who may be put on the boards of banks that sign up to the guarantee. And if ever they wanted to send out a message to senior managements to carry on as before, they did just that. The list reads like a who's who of those who were allegedly at the helm when this disaster was fermenting and who missed it completely. To name a few: Dick Spring, former Minister for Finance; Ray MacSharry, former Minister for Finance; Alan Dukes, former Minister for Finance; Tom Considine, former Secretary-General of the Department of Finance; and, possibly most ironic of all, Anthony Spollen, former head of internal audit at AIB Group. Not much auditing of bad debt done in his time!

If all this "business as usual" wasn't enough, and extremely worrying, the Government have not laughed away the idea of private equity firms as a means of recapitalising the banks. In fact Lenihan seems to see them as a genuine prospect. "We cannot characterise foreign investment all the time as predatory or a threat. Of course if there is private investment in the banks I will have to ensure that the public interest is served." Was the public's interest served in the now infamous case of Eircom? The Government would probably say Yes!

The general secretary of the IBOA, Larry Broderick, has more accurately described these firms as *"the real sharks of the business world. They operate on the basis of maximising short-term opportunities. These people have no interest in the long-term viability of the business; they have no concern for the development of the Irish economy or the future well-being of the Irish people: they are only attracted by the prospect of massive returns on their investment.*

"Predators like these aim to buy cheaply and reduce costs in whatever way they can: by cutting staff numbers and pay, by squeezing customers, and cutting services. They aim to realise as much asset value as possible, and then sell on what's left of the business. They are not philanthropists. They are highly secretive entities that are feared and despised in equal measure throughout the business community."

And he is certainly right in saying, *"Far from facilitating this development, the Government should intervene now to advise the bank that such an approach would offer a short-term easing of its current problems—but at too high a cost in the long term."*

But that would require bottle, and if there's one thing we know this Government is lacking, it's bottle.

[GM]

Dismantling the public health service by stealth

THE "National Treatment Purchase Fund" is the most explicit demonstration yet of the dismantling of the public health system.

Other actions by the Government are more indirect and are going on behind the scenes. The "co-location" of private hospitals in the grounds of public hospitals is also open by necessity (and is being vigorously opposed); but the Treatment Purchase Fund is a very difficult issue. To oppose it is to appear to say to sick people who have been on a waiting list for an excessive length of time that they should wait even longer.

It should nevertheless be opposed, because it is the means of dismantling the public health service. The total collusion between the Government (as the instrument of private business), the civil service and the medical profession in the systematic capitulation to privatisation is one of the most disgraceful acts of betrayal of the people.

With the baying of the Government parties and Fine Gael for "cutting costs," where are the intrepid investigative journalists asking for an investigation into the cost of paying private hospitals for treating patients while cutting the funding of public hospitals? Far from raising such questions, they add to the hue and cry with their lame questions about cutting costs and attacking public-service workers.

Will the Government publish a breakdown of how much they pay each year to private providers, by type, for all services, including "advice" from financial and medical consultants—who are themselves involved in private hospitals? Will they publish a list, with amounts, of those receiving these funds, as they do for the legal profession? This would allow the real cost of public health to emerge, rather than the cost of subsidising private health-for-profit operators.

Does anyone investigate the ratio of occupied public hospital beds to the number occupied in private hospitals? Or ask what is the real function of the Treatment Purchase Fund, apart from dampening outright opposition at levels that could not be contained? It is to fill the beds of private hospitals, at the taxpayers' expense.

These hospitals do a roaring business at weekends, treating public patients, and a walk through any private hospital reveals the fact that there are empty beds needing patients. As it costs more to treat a patient for private profit than at pure cost, the costs can only increase beyond the taxpayers' ability to pay, and then the pay-or-die system will be complete.

Public hospitals are being told to redirect patients to the treatment fund. Surgery is being delayed in public hospitals while surgeons are available, because of the lack of funds.

From time to time these issues are raised on the radio, but usually in short slots on daytime programmes, which necessarily exclude large sections of the population. The debate on prime-time current affairs programmes is limited to proponents of the prevailing ideology; and the excuse, according to one brave consultant who exposes the system, is that when it is known to the Government who is debating with them they decline to take part. Then the television producers say they can't debate the issue, because it would be "unbalanced." What media adviser thought of that one?

In the one or two exceptions to this the audience gave the panel such a roasting that they are not likely to expose themselves again. And even that was such a loaded panel that the opposition was limited to very brief comments from the audience.

Privatisation and the European Union

The latest nail in the coffin of our health service is the tax allowance for the holders of private health insurance to subsidise the VHI, because of its older membership. This is a direct result of the action of unscrupulous health insurance companies with a younger membership in refusing to participate in a proposed equalisation scheme that would spread the cost among all companies. They rigorously opposed it in the courts, using the Competition Act (2002)—an instrument of the European Union—and they won, because the law operates on a system of protecting private ownership at the expense of the rights of the people.

As a result, VHI premiums will become unaffordable, and then what will the Government do if everyone goes back to the public health system? This is something they must avoid at all costs, until the project of handing over the public health service is completed.

The tax allowance for subscribers was accompanied by a threat to the younger population that if they don't join a private health scheme early in life they will be penalised later by higher premiums. Now, why should people be threatened if the public health service is to continue? Because, largely, it won't be, except in a skeleton form with poor service for society's "failures." And who cares about them?

It's easy to lay all the blame on Mary Harney, and indeed her ideology and that of the defunct PDs was the instrument for starting this process. But the real blame lies with the European Union and its policy of privatisation of public services, which is itself a project of the group of twenty of the largest capitalist countries and their programme espoused in the UN Investment Reports since the 1980s. This ideology is firmly stated: that public services must be dismantled, and that this is a great source of profit for private companies, particularly transnational corporations.

We are seeing this today in Ireland, where American companies are cleaning up, and indirectly causing the premature death of public patients.

How can the trade union leadership stand by and let their own members suffer, both in their employment as union members and as citizens needing medical treatment? Employers act in their own interests instantly when anything threatens them; and the trade unions can do the same, as united they are the larger force in society. There are many trade union groups taking action; but it needs the stronger force of the leadership to give this direction and strength.

[DUB]

Trade unions

It's staring us in the face!

THE ICTU's recent comprehensive ratification of the new national wage agreement, and its add-ons, demonstrated more than the working class's "patriotic duty" to the country's, and the planet's, financial meltdown. It reflected the trade union members' loyalty to and faith in their leaderships, a logical grasp of the dramatic times we are experiencing, and, above all, a collective unity of purpose in facing into the obvious gloom that awaits.

Some unions that traditionally voted No to successive partnership proposals —those unions that tended to represent the lower-paid of Ireland's work force, such as Mandate—bucked their trend and rolled in behind the Yes camp. (IBEC must have thought it had awakened to a new dawn, as some of its delegates at the recent "social partnership" negotiations consistently argued that representations by the ICTU on cutting a better deal for the lower-paid were pointless, given that this union would vote against the overall deal anyway.) But this change of policy direction belies some of the reasoning and sentiment therein.

Mandate's recent special delegate conference on the new national wage agreement provided (for once) a welcome robust debate not only on the wage proposals themselves but also on the lack of class consciousness in Irish politics. While it is too early—and, dare I say, too naïve—to suggest an electoral sea-change that would revolutionise the country's political landscape, there was nevertheless evidence of workers looking beyond the smaller picture of the wage proposals and asking questions about the very system and its custodians that set the scene whereby workers scrambled for crumbs at the negotiating table. And when I talk about the system I don't mean social partnership!

Despite an ultra-left contribution that, as ever, was obstructively rhetorical and attacked the leadership of Mandate for daring to recommend the wage proposals to its membership, and for seeking to outline the reasons why, a number of the contributing delegates openly evinced their anger and disgust at a social and political system that is inherently socially criminal.

This raises the question, What next? And is there an alternative?

When ordinary retail workers—the great majority of them women, both young and old—bravely and representatively make their views known at such a delegate conference, it behoves that union's leadership—as well as the broader trade union leadership—to reach for and deliver the programme that provides more than social and financial bankruptcy.

An acceptance by union leaders that there is an alternative to the capitalist system, and an affirmation to create and embrace a programme seeking that alternative, would be a start!

But what is that alternative?

As media pundits and political commentators flirt with the word "alternative," unless it directly relates to Barack Obama's electoral strategies and success, they should really just come out and declare it. It is socialism—a word that appears to have been lost from our vocabulary of late, probably since the capitalist-induced and led demise of the eastern bloc.

Vincent Browne in his *Irish Times* column (26 November 2008) rightly noted how Ireland's politically and economically powerful elite presided

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- Connolly Youth Movement: **www.cym.ie**
- Cuba Support Group: **www.cubasupport.com**
- International Brigade Commemoration Committee: **homepage.ntlworld.com/e-mckinley/ibcc.html**
- Ireland-Palestine Solidarity Campaign: **www.ipsc.ie**
- James Connolly Education Trust: **www.iol.ie/~sob/jcet**
- Latin America Solidarity Centre: **www.lasc.ie**
- Peace and Neutrality Alliance (PANA): **www.pana.ie**
- People's Movement: **www.people.ie**
- Progressive Film Club: **www.progressivefilmclub.ie**

over unprecedented greed and wealth inequalities and the subsequent ill effects on society but never once dared to suggest or express the alternative.

The Marxist-Leninist left has never been shocked at the inherent implosions within capitalism. But, worryingly, it appears that Irish society—especially those organs and institutions that represent the interests of the ordinary citizen and worker—is more frightened of the challenge of thinking and acting outside the box than of free-falling back into a system that is manifestly corrosive and corrupt.

Compare this position with Connolly's writings in the late nineteenth century, when he presciently emphasised: "If you remove the English army tomorrow and hoist the Green Flag over Dublin Castle, unless you set about the organisation of the socialist republic, your efforts would be in vain." (*Shan Van Vocht,* January 1897).

He further espoused, in "Let us free Ireland" (*Workers' Republic,* 1899, and *Socialism Made Easy,* 1908), the rightful fear of handing an Ireland free of English occupation to the Irish "profit-grinding capitalist" and, appropriately enough for today's society, concluded: "Let us organise to meet our masters and destroy their mastership, organise to drive them from their hold upon public life through their public power . . . from the preying of man upon his fellow man."

As a means of real "patriotic duty" the working class and its leaders must plot the path to real social equality, i.e. socialism. It's time to stop fearing or daring to believe. Connolly didn't.

It is our right to believe that we can create a society free of competition and greed—a society that guarantees the basic staples of job security, universally free health and education, real equality, true and proper political accountability, the real potential for the planet's survival.

[CC]

International

Canada's role in the brutal exploitation of Guatemala

On 8 and 9 January of last year the Mayan Q'eqchi' inhabitants of several villages around El Estor were forcibly and violently evicted from their homes by heavily armed Guatemalan police and military.

El Estor is a town in north-east Guatemala, near the shores of Lake Izabal. The area is rich in resources, with oil, nickel, and other minerals. In 1965 the lands that the indigenous communities were living on were given by the Guatemalan military to a Canadian mining company, International Nickel Company (INCO), under its Guatemalan-controlled company, EXMIBAL. INCO was granted a forty-year lease on the indigenous land, which has been seen as historically Mayan territory.

As the mining project developed, EXMIBAL increased its area, forcibly evicting more people. The part played by the Guatemalan army is well documented in the report of the UN-sponsored Truth Commission (1999). The mines operated only briefly in the late 1970s and closed in 1981. While they were in operation there were many protests against what people saw as the sale of non-renewable resources for political gain.

In November 1979 a professor from Universidad San Carlos, the country's leading university, was murdered and another injured by unknown gunmen. Both were investigating EXMIBAL. Local protests culminated in the notorious massacre of more than a hundred Q'eqchi'. On the same day protesters travelling to El Estor were fired on by gunmen in EXMIBAL trucks.

Blaming the fall in nickel prices, EXMIBAL ceased its operations in 1981. Between 1981 and 2004 the mines lay dormant, though the installations on the land became notorious for torture and murder carried out by the military.

Now the Guatemalan Nickel Company (CNG), a subsidiary of another Canadian mining corporation, Skye Resources, claims the land and the Fenix mine as theirs, having bought the mining rights from INCO. While Skye claim that the evictions were peaceful, a nine-minute video recorded by witnesses shows what really happened. There were no court orders for these evictions, making them unlawful.

With the military and police backing them up, the company's workers burned people's homes while women and children looked on, watching their homes and belongings go up in flames.

The part played by the military was illegal under the Guatemalan Peace Accord of 1996, which outlaws the involvement of the military in internal policing.

In these most recent evictions, many doubts have been cast on the legality of the claim by Skye Resources to the land. The company has been unable to produce property deeds and never consulted the local people, as required under the International Labour Organisation's Convention 169, covering indigenous and tribal peoples in independent countries, which Guatemala ratified in 1996. The communities have consistently and repeatedly said they don't want their land mined.

During the 36-year genocide in Guatemala, in which 250,000 people were killed or disappeared, Canadian mining companies played a bloody part. The activities of INCO were supported and facilitated by brutal and repressive military dictatorships, which massacred and brutalised indigenous populations.

Numerous human-rights organisations, including a United Nations commission, found INCO to be complicit in grave violations of human rights, including threats and assassinations.

The Canadian ambassador to Guatemala, Kenneth Cook, played an outrageous role in actively spreading misinformation about what was happening. He claimed that videos and pictures showing the heavy-handedness of the evictions were falsified. He even went as far as to claim that actors had been used in the video, which was recorded by witnesses.

Cook and the Canadian embassy in Guatemala have attempted to discredit and undermine the legitimate protests and voices of the Q'eqchi' Maya. Many different sources, including leaders of the Guatemalan church, have confirmed that Cook is attempting to discredit the exposure of the horrendous complicity in human rights violations by Canadian companies.

This aggressive mining has already degraded El Estor's fragile ecosystem. Mountainsides have been deforested, causing landslides.

The Government of Canada must be made to explain and apologise for the behaviour of Canadian mining companies abroad. They must explain the treatment of local communities by these companies.

There must be dialogue with the local people, who are willing to talk. However, CGN and Skye refuse direct dialogue. There must also be independent investigations into the evictions. The investigation so far is being carried out by the prosecutor who ordered the evictions.

There must be transparent mechanisms for dealing with the historical land conflicts in the area. The Guatemalan government must live up to its international commitments to the human rights of the indigenous Mayan people and their land and resources.

[JM]

Icelanders take up the fight

ON Sunday 23 November many thousands of demonstrators filled the streets of Reykjavík to demand the resignation of the Prime Minister, Geir Haarde, and the governor of the Icelandic central bank, Davíð Oddsson, for their handling of the catastrophic collapse of Iceland's financial system, including the failure of the country's three main banks. This was reported to be the biggest public demonstration in Iceland since the anti-NATO riots of 1949.

The previous day some hundreds of people besieged the police headquarters, calling for the release of a man arrested at a previous demonstration. The police, in apparent panic, attacked the demonstrators with pepper spray, and five people had to be hospitalised.

These events represent the culmination of discontent which has been growing for some time. Every Friday, for instance, truck-drivers block Iceland's roads in protest against rising fuel prices.

Icelandic workers have suddenly been hit by unemployment, in a country that has had almost full employment for two generations. Many hundreds of Icelanders who now find themselves without a job have been seeking work in Norway, according to

news reports. The government has been running around with the begging-bowl and at the time of writing has garnered a total of $11 billion in "bail-outs," mainly from the International Monetary Fund, which come with written or unwritten conditions.

One of those conditions may well be an understanding that Iceland will join the European Union. Spokespeople for the Brussels construct have let it be known that Iceland would not be obliged to go through the lengthy process that applies to Turkey, Croatia and others but would be fast-tracked into membership within a year. The mainstream media have being pushing this, and an opinion poll suggests that there is now a big majority in the country in favour, mainly on the grounds that there is "no choice."

The main government party, the Independence Party, has been opposed to EU membership up to recently—mainly because it would destroy the fishing industry—but is now divided, and it will hold a special conference in January to review its policy. Its partner in government, the Progressive Party, is officially pro-EU. The main opposition party, the Social Democrats, is also pro-EU, as is the euro-trotting leadership of the trade unions.

However, there is serious resistance to the surrender of Icelandic sovereignty, led by the Left-Green Movement and the broad organisation Heimssýn ("world vision"). The Left-Green Movement is a strong political party, which got 14 per cent of the votes in the general election of May 2007 and has nine members of parliament. It opposes membership of NATO, the European Union and the Western European Union and favours an independent foreign policy. In its statement of fundamental policies it says: "The Movement rejects the autocracy of capitalism and seeks to protect the independence of the nation and its sovereignty over its own natural resources."

Heimssýn argues that national independence is threatened and that Iceland should be open to the world rather than confine itself to the European Union. Among its leading adherents are members of the Independence Party and even the Progressive Party, as well as Left-Greens. It has attracted academics, lawyers, students, journalists, workers and small business people as well as political activists. The comprehensiveness of its membership suggests that the engorging of Iceland by the EU monster may not be the leisurely process the feeders expect.

[CDF]

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