

Racism in Ireland

Travellers

Workers Solidarity Movement

1993

Anti-racist work is a major concern of the left in Europe at the moment. Given the rise of racist attacks in Germany and France especially, this is important work. However very few groups or individuals on the left in Ireland understand that the situation of Travellers is the most explicit form of racism in this country. Because Travellers are white, people have difficulty applying the concept of racism to them. However it takes no more than a quick perusal of recent press clippings to gather abundant evidence of the racism faced by Travellers. A few examples are as follows:

“A round the clock picket by protesting residents continued today to prevent a temporary site being set up for Travellers in Limerick”. Evening Herald.

“The residents of an estate outside Arklow who are now to undertake a rent strike over the council decision to house the family of Travellers.....” Wicklow People.

“Residents of a housing estate in Rathfarnham will this morning place a picket on the entrance to land which is to be developed by Dublin Corporation as a halting site for 20 itinerant families’. Irish Press.

“A horrific attack involving the spraying of foul smelling cattle slurry against caravans of Traveller families has been criticised by a priest... a Garda spokesman at Tullow described it as a minor incident.” Irish Independent.

The publican who barred ‘Glenroe’ actor Michael Collins from his pub confirmed last night he did so because he was a Traveller” Irish Independent.

Recently in Clondalkin two Traveller families have been intimidated out of their houses by mobs. Traveller camps have been petrol bombed, families have been physically attacked by farmers in Galway, all in the very recent past. Travellers are subjected to the most extreme forms of social exclusion and segregation which can only be described as apartheid.

They are refused service in pubs, cafes, many shops, launderettes, hairdressers, discos, hotels, cinemas and even some doctors refuse to serve them. At an institutional level they are forced to sign on at different times to the rest of the population and in Dublin all Travellers who claim Supplementary Welfare have to do so in one separate health centre, Castle Street, whether they live in Bray or Balbriggan.

Officially this is done to provide them with a service that respects their nomadic culture. In reality nothing could be further from the truth, which is that it is done in order to discriminate against them more efficiently. At school many Traveller children are taught in totally segregated classes which cater for Traveller children of all ages in the one class. Some notorious schools have gone so far as to paint a white line down the middle of the playground and Traveller children are not allowed to cross over it.

Racism is a particular form of domination, exploitation and exclusion. Racism against Travellers and Gypsies is rooted in an ideology of sedentarist superiority. This is the belief that the settled person's way of life is the modern norm and that nomadism is a throwback to less civilised times.

Nomadic people also pose a threat to the values of property ownership and the accumulation of possessions. Racism involves power domination by one group over the other. Because Travellers are such a small minority of the population (0.5% approx) they are totally at the mercy of the settled population. The effects of this racism and exclusion can be graphically seen in the health statistics of the Traveller population.

Traveller infants have three times the infant mortality rate of the settled population. Traveller women have a life expectancy that is fifteen years less than their settled counterparts and Traveller men's life expectancy is ten years less than settled men's. They don't fare any better educationally. In 1993 only a handful of Traveller children, about 50 nationwide, have made it into second level education and there are still only three Travellers nationwide who have completed a third level course.

About 80% of the adult population are illiterate and still only about 70% of the primary school age children get to school. Schools still refuse to take them as a school in Dún Laoghaire did in March. These are the statistics of racism... a group of the population whose health and educational standards are at least 50 years behind that of the rest of the population. But the best is yet to come as the official response to these kinds of statistics is to blame this scandalous situation on Travellers themselves and on their preferred nomadic lifestyle.

A recent official report from Dublin County Council is a very good example of racist thinking. In this report which went to all the councillors in January, Travellers' lifestyle is blamed for all the major social problems in the county, including unemployment! The report concludes that it is time to break the cycle of Travellers' culture by discouraging them from marrying each other and forcing them to adopt a more responsible (i.e. settled) lifestyle by not building halting sites. Given that there are 3,000 families already on the housing waiting lists in Dublin alone it is not clear how exactly this policy is going to improve anyone's situation.

Even within liberal and left wing circles there is a belief that there is nothing wrong with promoting the idea of quotas when it comes to Travellers. The idea that only ten families should be accommodated in an area has been promoted by everyone from the Labour party to the 'Militant'. Of course this is an inherently racist position to adopt. It would not be acceptable to suggest that only ten black families should be housed in any one community and it is no more acceptable to suggest this for Travellers. Likewise the idea of separate segregated and inevitably inferior services must be opposed.

Racism against Gypsies and Travellers goes back to the time they started migrating from India around the 11th century. It reached its height with the extermination of a quarter of a million Gypsies and Travellers by the Nazis. In Ireland the racism against Travellers is so deep and so

all pervasive that few people even recognise it for what it is. In the fight against this racism Travellers themselves and their organisations need to be centrally involved.

They must set the agenda, deciding on what issues and how they want to fight. They need the active support of the left, and especially of the trade union movement because they have very little muscle on their own. There have been attempts over the past thirty years at Traveller self-organisation but these organisations were quickly smashed by the state.

In 1963 the Gardai planted explosives on Gratton Puxon, the organiser of the Irish Traveller Community which was becoming a force to be reckoned with. Nearly twenty years later they planted stolen jewellery on Nan Joyce, a leading member of the Traveller-only organisation Minceir Miscli. Nan ran against a racist candidate in Tallaght in the General Election of 1982 and got twice the number of votes as he did. Currently the Irish Traveller movement is organising around the country. It remains to be seen if it will become a fighting body or confine itself to lobbying. For left wing activists concerned about racism there is plenty of it to fight in relation to Travellers.

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