

The IAWM's dismal leadership

A critique of the politics of Trotskyism

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A character in Dermot Healy's novel Sudden Times remarks "Politics makes me dizzy. They're cat. If you're paranoid about government then the psyche is unsettled. You're not well. Next thing is you're standing in Saint Columba's in your pyjamas talking to some bollocks about the phallus and chewing something to bring you down. No sir. No way." Well after months of regularly attending the Irish Anti-War Movement's marches and particularly after months of listening to the speeches of the leading lights of the IAWM, I can sympathise with these sentiments. My head is buzzing with cant and rhetoric and I have that dejected feeling you get when you know you have just lost a chance that won't be coming around again for a long time.

Now credit should be given where credit is due. The IAWM did invaluable work in mobilising people. They played a central role building a very large antiwar movement. They undertook all those necessary but thankless tasks that make any social movement happen — postering, distributing leaflets, setting up local branches, holding meetings and the like. They called for marches and faithfully shunted their megaphones, placards and banners to the demos. They created a media profile for the anti-war movement and Richard Boyd Barrett in particular made a very good fist of making the anti-war position clear and coherent on the national airwaves. Groups such as writers against the war produced with incredible speed an anthology of writings against the war. Local groups like the Fairview anti-war group, and I'm sure many local groups that I do not know about, excelled themselves in organising anti-war activity in their area. Finally and most importantly, the IAWM can claim with considerable justification to have been the main moving force behind the largest march in Irish history about an international issue. It was an extraordinary day and the IAWM can be proud of their role in making it happen.

However, despite this unprecedented show of public support for the peace movement the IAWM failed to achieve any of the realisable aims that they set themselves. The IAWM was incapable of devising an effective strategy to disrupt the logistical support offered by the Irish state to the US war machine. Then when Bush and his cronies shored up in Hillsborough and worked themselves into a lather of self congratulation, the Irish anti war movement was given a opportunity to show the world that we were not taken in by this revolting spectacle that aimed to legitimise their warmongering. Once again, the leadership of the IAWM failed to rise to the challenge.

Why did the leadership of the IAWM do so little with so much support? The answer lies in the politics of the Trotskyist groups that effectively ran the IAWM, namely the Socialist Workers Party and the Socialist Party (who played the more low key role of the two groups). Their approach to politics can be characterised as a peculiar and offputting blend of opportunism and dogmatism. Both of these tendencies are clearly discernible in the direction the IAWM took over the past few months.

The scale of anti-war sentiment surprised everyone and perhaps understandably the Trotskyists in the IAWM did not want to lose their hard won credibility by doing anything too radical. The anti war movement gave them unprecedented access to the media, the unions and a large swathe of potential new recruits, so despite a revolutionary anti-capitalist analysis of the causes of war the SWP and the SP became strangely timid. They displayed a prissy respect for legality that would usually only be found amongst the faithful at a PD Ard Fheis. The result was a paralysing lack of nerve. This makes good sense when a movement is in its infancy but after February the 15th and after the government signalled in its own inimitably unclear way that they were going to blather a bit and then continue to offer full support to the US war effort, the IAWM should have gone on the offensive with a campaign of non-violent civil disobedience. However, the IAWM decided to continue to rely on demonstrations to stop the war.

I have no problem with marches and I think they are important but it was abundantly clear that in this case marches alone were not sufficient. These events became highly ritualised and banal events and created the sense of a peace movement Ground Hog day. The pervasive atmosphere of these events was not of anger or sorrow but of aimlessness. The only discernible difference between each march was that the speeches seemed to become longer and the march routes shorter, as if verbiage from union bureaucrats and parliamentary parties could halt the juggernaut of US imperialism. This lack of courage and imagination damaged the development of the anti-war movement in qualitative terms if not perhaps in quantitative terms. Once the state announced that it was happy to ignore public opinion, other tactics should have been considered but politicking was deemed more important than taking effective action against the war.

This lack of nerve had to be balanced with some radical posturing to keep their own members happy. Empty gestures became the order of the day from early on in the campaign. In February organisers had decided to march down Grafton street on a Saturday afternoon. The Gardai said this was not on but the IAWM said that they would march up Grafton street anyway. Following some totally meaningless and ludicrous grandstanding by the SWP at the end of Grafton street the class warriors shuffled off. There was similar nonsense on the day the bombing of Iraq began outside the British and US embassies. At the end of the demonstration, the IAWM initiated a road blockade. But the sharper eyed of the demonstrators noticed that the road had already been closed off by the Gardai, making the gesture entirely pointless.

The IAWM did eventually shift their emphasis to civil disobedience, announcing that they intended to blockade the Dáil. A large number of people turned up and refused to be intimidated by a show of strength by the police. The atmosphere was angry and resolute and in media terms it proved an effective way of highlighting the government's complicity in the US war effort. However, the way the event finished showed once again that the IAWM leadership was unwilling to take even the smallest risk to register their disgust at the war. The protest was called off after some meaningless concessions from the cops. As people moved off for some more edifying speeches, a dozen cars came out of the front gate of the Dáil. No doubt the life of a public representative is stressful enough without being unduly delayed from getting home for cocoa.

This type of choreography was followed to its ignominious end in Hillsborough where an attempt was made by protestors to circumvent police lines by jumping into an adjacent field. The response of the stewards to this made the PSNI's day. In the following days a number of SWP members left the organisation revolted by the "if in doubt do nothing" stance of their party.

Now your average Bolshevik will have a go at a rolling doughnut but will then claim that history and their analysis show that the doughnut was by rights theirs anyway. In other words they are dogmatic about their right to be opportunistic. This manifested itself in a number of ways. The SWP and SP attitude to direct action as an anti-war tactic is a case in point. Both groups paid lip service to the tactic of direct action and the SWP was even calling for mass direct action against the war late in 2002 but when they were confronted by a small, disorganised group trying to effect a mass direct action against US military refuelling in Shannon they did everything in their power to undermine them. Both groups, employing clunky and formulaic ideology, called the attempted direct action "premature" and "elitist" and made dark predictions that the event would end in violence. The SP went out of its way to point out that the only valid form of direct action in Shannon was strike action initiated by the workers in Shannon and Joe Higgins thunderously denounced the attempt in, you guessed it, yet another speech. This empty workerist rhetoric was both disingenuous and lazy as neither of these groups did anything to facilitate strike action in Shannon and even refused to lobby the ICTU to oppose the war.

The marginalisation of other elements of the anti-war movement is in keeping with the Trotskyist analysis that capitalism can only be defeated by one big, centralised organisation with the "correct ideas." Any social movement that these groups can manage to dominate will function according to this model. This hostility to diversity became acute after February the 15th. Flushed with their own importance, the Trotskyists in the IAWM behaved as if they owned the 150,000 people who turned up to protest against the war. It was noteworthy that they showed no interest in events, pickets and demos that they had not called themselves. It is also worth noting by the way that many of the most interesting and imaginative initiatives of the peace movement came from outside the orbit of the IAWM. For instance the establishment of the peace camp, the smashing up of the US planes, the plane spotting, the blocking of the entrance to the Dáil on Day X and the cacerolazo, were all forms of protest devised by small groups outside of the IAWM.

There is of course a ludicrous side to all this. There is the laughably predictable second rate political machinations and the committee room shenanigans, the inability to count correctly how many people attend any given event, the whiff of desperation that marks their recruiting techniques, the dull rhetoric and the incessant paper selling.

During a blockade of the Dáil this compulsive ideology peddling reached hitherto unimaginable farcical levels. The sit down protest became a bit heated when the riot police began to forcibly remove protestors from the road. Most of the protestors resisted the police non-violently but, amongst all the heaving and shoving, one brave evangelist from the SWP was not distracted from his revolutionary duty and continued to loudly offer his newspaper to those in the middle of the melee. This is not too important in the grander scale of things but it does pose the question of whether it is the most effective way of opposing imperialism and war.

The US state is in the process of marking out a new, aggressive and very dangerous geopolitical strategy. The little Caesars of the state department intend to reshape the world as they see fit and they do not care how high the pile of corpses will be. Opposing them effectively will demand more effort and courage than we, the IAWM and the broader anti-war movement, have shown to date. Radical politics, such as it is, in Ireland is still dominated, in both form and content, by

Trotskyism and this is a serious obstacle to successful opposition to capitalism and imperialism. The spectre of outdated, formulaic and authoritarian politics haunts the Irish left and we have to develop more open and attractive forms of politics and thinking in response to this. We cannot let radical politics in the hands of those who have a true Shidas touch — everything they touch turns to shite.

The last significant event called for by the IAWM was a march in Shannon. The numbers had dwindled into the hundreds as the IAWM leadership led the faithful into an enclosed area, a sheep pen of sorts, to listen to the same old collection of shop worn clichés. So one last question- will it be two legs good, four legs better next time round?

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