The unions after the celtic tiger

James Redmond

24 May 2010

Contents

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 attemps to transfer the cost of the recession to working people. 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[1]. Roughly three quarters of the manufacturing labour force is employed in multinationals and these organisations account for more that 80 per cent of exports from the country[2].

[1] Gunnigle, McMahon and Fitzgerald. (1999) (eds) Industrial Relations In Ireland Theory and Practice, 2nd Edition, Gill and MacMillian. 404–405.

[2] www.lrc.ie/documents/.../StrugglingToFollowTheHighRoad.pdf

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 workslike 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 Reagonomics) 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[3] 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[4].

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 trans-national 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.

[3] See Hearn, Denis. (1998) Inside The Celtic Tiger: The Irish Economy and The Asian Model, Pluto Press, UK.

[4] Allen, Kieran. (2000) The Celtic Tiger: The Myth of Social Partnership, Manchester University Press, Manchester.: 23 -27.

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[5]' 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[6]' 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[7]. 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[8]. 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[9].

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[10].

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.

---

[5] Castells, Manuel. (1997) The Information Age, Vol 2: The Power of Identity, Blackwell Oxford: 354

[6] 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

[7] Roche, W. K. (2001) 'Accounting for the Trend in Union Recognition in Ireland', Industrial Relations Journal, 32, 1, pp37–54.

[8] Missing footnote

[9] www.eurofound.europa.eu/ eiro/studies/TN0904049s/ie0904049q.htm

[10] Roche, WK & John F. Greary. (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

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[11].' 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[12].

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[13]' 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[14]'

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[15].' 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[16].

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[17].

[11] Treu, T. (1992) "Labour flexibility in Europe", International Labour Review, Vol. 131 No. 4 , pp. 497–512.

[12] www.cso.ie labour_market/current/qnhsunionmembership.pdf

[13] Webb, S. and Webb, B. (1894) The History of Trade Unionism Longman Green, London.: 1

[14] Croucher, R. & Brewster, C. (1998) 'Flexible working practices and the trade unions,' Employee Relations, Vol 20, Issue 5: 448.

[15] 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>

[16] Stirling, John.(2005) 'There's a new world somewhere: The rediscovery of trade unionism' Capital & Class, Autumn 2005, viewed 5 June 2006 <www.findarticles. com/p/articles/mi_qa3780/is_200510/ai_n15716271>

[17] O'Connell et al. 'The Changing Workplace: A Survey of Employee's Views and Experiences' Forum on the Workplace Research Series, number 2. p70

The unions are faced with the challenge of how to organise and represent new interest groups that make up the modern workplace[18]. 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,[19]. 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[20]."

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 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[21].

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 [22].

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[22], 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[23].'

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

[18] www.eurofound. europa.eu/eiro/2005/10/feature/ie0510201f.htm

[19] http:// www.cso.ie/releasespublications/documents/labour_market/ current/qnhsunionmembership.pdf

[20] www.ictu.ie/.../doc/ ictu_women_and_recession_seminar_report1.doc

[21] http:// www.lrc.ie/documents/publications/lrcsurveysreviews/Migrant_Workers_Study.pdf P16

[22] 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.

[23] Silver, Beverly J. (2003) Forces of Labour. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

economy[24].' On one hand, this leads to a considerable economic polar sation 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, 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[25].'

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[26]' 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

[24] Hall, Peter. (1996) 'Cities of tomorrow : an intellectual history of urban planning and design in the twentieth century,' Blackwell, Oxford. P 422

[25] Clark, I. Almond. P. Gunnigle P. & Wachter, H. (2005) 'The Americanisation of the European business system?' Industrial Relations Journal 36:6, p513

[26] Allen, Kieran. (2000) The Celtic Tiger: The Myth of Social Partnership, Manchester University Press, Manchester. p103

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[27].'

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 bargainingxii, 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[28]." 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[29].'

[27] OECD, Regulatory Reform In Ireland. (Paris OECD, p2001) p27

[28] Bagguley, P. 'The Individualisation of Class Struggle,' Leeds Sociology Department, viewed 9 July, 2006 <www.leeds.ac.uk/ sociology/people/pbdocs/Individ%2520Class%2520Struggle. doc>

[29] Silver, Beverly J. (2003) Forces of Labour. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. p16

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 revitalise 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[30].'

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 The recent mobilisations by the SIPTU Community

[30] Bourdieu, P. 1998. Acts of Resistance. Against the New Myths of Our Time, Polity Press, Cambridge pp 52–53.

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[31].' 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 stepping 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.

[31] 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, <info.interactivist. net/article.pl?sid=05/03/24/170247> p202

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 faciliated 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 occastions 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 employeeclass 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 mobisations 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 May-days in the states. Our tradition is that of a social movement, and anarchism is a a strategy that can enable our class to win rather than a philosophy wedded to images and tactics from the past. The libertarion mileu 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.

[22]www.eurofound. europa.eu/eiro/2005/10/feature/ie0510201f.htm

James Redmond
The unions after the celtic tiger
24 May 2010

Retrieved on 17th December 2021 from www.wsm.ie
Published in the *Irish Anarchist Review* Issue 1.

theanarchistlibrary.org