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No Global: The People of Ireland Versus the multinationals

By Robert Allen, Pluto Press 2004,
£14.99/Euro21.45

Kevin Doyle

2004

No Global is based on Robert Allen and Tara Jones's *Guests Of The Nation* (1990). Essentially it is an account of the various environmental clashes that have taken place in Ireland since the mid-70s when the Irish Government's policy of attracting multinational corporation into Ireland — in particular in the chemicals and pharmaceuticals sector — moved into full swing.

In terms of being a record of these many struggles, *No Global* is a very useful compendium with a lot of first hand information as well as useful analysis. The author was involved in some of the events he addresses and this adds a particular validity to the account.

No Global is a departure from *Guests Of The Nation* in terms of its scope. It covers new ground and updates the reader on what has happened since 1990. But Allen also attempts to re-position the context of the various struggles that have taken

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place in Ireland in the past 30 years within the much more recent 'anti-globalisation' movement. Although this may be useful in seeing the conflict within the larger picture of modern capitalism it never seriously adds to the analysis.

Environment versus jobs is a theme running through the book and anyone who knows anything about recent Irish history will not be surprised as to why this is so. The Irish State's policy of attracting foreign multinationals into the country — with lucrative tax breaks and set-up grants — had much to do with the ongoing crisis of employment-creation and emigration. Different class interests were at play. For Irish workers unemployment and emigration had been an ongoing disaster. For the Irish bourgeoisie there was the simple economic need to become a player in the developing international capitalist economy. Also, unemployment and emigration were huge and probably unsustainable long-term burdens on the State. Attracting foreign multinational was vital.

The arrival of a series of major multinationals in the 70s (Pfizer was one of the first) galvanised the newly emerging environmental movement. No Global documents a series of hard-fought victories at Raybestos Manhattan, Merck Shape Dohme and Merrell Dow (to name just a few). Although a lot of detail is given — in some cases too much, it must said — it nevertheless becomes clear what an important role the environmental movement has played in forcing the Irish State to tighten up on environmental licensing and effluent discharge laws — which were even laxer than they are.

But No Global also indicates, to me at least, that overall the Irish State was able to outmanoeuvre the environmental movement and push ahead with its plans. The reasons for this are interesting and in the long term very useful to look at. Also, they are undoubtedly the subject for much debate. Clearly, in terms of the overall confrontation between the State and the environmental movement, the climate of emigration and unemployment was key. But equally relevant (and ultimately debil-

itating) was the class nature of the environmental movement. Although often composed of people from many classes it was fundamentally dominated by those with little or no appreciation for working-class difficulties. Very often the workers in the noxious industry area were ignored or abandoned to 'the other side' – to bring them on board the environmental movement was simply seen as impossible. But this failure seriously weakened a number of the protest struggles as well as leaving a longer term legacy that continues to hamper the oppositional movement and its ability to take on the Irish State.

No Global does well to draw attention to the somewhat spontaneous and local nature of many of the struggles that it documents. Often communities had little time and few resources when facing the combined might of the Irish State, the multinationals and the various local Chambers of Commerce (who were, needless to say, pro-multinational). Struggles, moreover, emerged piecemeal and many vital decisions had to be taken on the move. In many respects it is a great credit to the participants that what was achieved was done so at all.

But No Global is less clear and less persuasive when it comes to dissecting the political ideas within the environmental movement and the problems these caused. References are made to activists 'living in green bubbles immune from the harsh social realities of modern Irish life'. This was partly about class politics but it was also about what differing sections of the environmental movement wanted. In this sense the difficult matter of 'the alternative' is often side-stepped or not addressed at all. At one point reference is made to alternative State policy that might favour small industry and craft based employment (rather than multinationals) – but what is one to really make of this? Resonances of De Valera and dancing at the crossroads?

Although the overall thrust of No Global seems to underline the schism between jobs and environment, there are important exceptions to this that are examined and described. For example at Penn Chemical plant in Cork (now Smith Kline Beecham)

the struggle between the workers and the management eventually spilled over into a major struggle within Cork Number 2 Branch of the SIPTU trade union. But this led on to the embattled Penn workers finally whistle-blowing on some of the environmental practices within the plant. (Interesting to note in passing that the workers saw fit to approach the media first and not the very active environmental movement in Cork harbour.)

A second and more important example of the link between workers' interests and the environmental struggle was at the Raybestos Manhattan plant near Ovens outside Cork in the late 70s/ early 80s. This early (and successful!) struggle saw the workers out on strike on a number of occasions in pursuit of their 'environmental' health. Important in this struggle was the activities of the much (at the time) maligned Noxious Industry Action Group (NIAG) which consciously sought to link the community's opposition efforts to the interests of the plant's workforce, particularly around health risk at the plant. Pilloried by the 'official' trade union movement, NIAG's activities paid off handsomely in a series of work stoppages that eventually forced Raybestos Manhattan out of Ireland (although to where, one wonders). The Raybestos Manhattan dispute is clearly important as an example of what is possible when an anti-capitalist rather than anti-industry perspective informs the environmental struggle. On a minor point I can't agree with the author that NIAG was anarchist in nature. It had a socialist focus, but the dominant ideas were still authoritarian Marxist.

As is pointed out in the introduction to No Global, the war over the environment is far from over. Capitalist production and the realities of profit making will ensure this. Here in Ireland the next stage of the struggle will focus on the issue of incinerators. In this sense No Global appears at a vital time. Anyone who wants to see how the bigger picture has unfolded to date can read in detail about the numerous struggles. The au-

thor is to be congratulated for such an achievement. This book is well worth a read.