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Learning Welsh Is What Solidarity Sounds Like

Language revival is class struggle — why the left in Wales can't stay monolingual.

Llinos Anwyl

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Everyone in the movement means well, but good intentions don't make a bilingual revolution.

At the start of almost every radical meeting I've attended in Wales, someone says:

> "Welcome*croeso*."

Then the rest of the discussion unfolds entirely in English. The word sits on the top of each agenda like a decoration — a gesture toward belonging that never quite lands.

Most of us already support the language in principle. We sign petitions, design bilingual posters for English-only events, and attend Welsh gigs… but principle is easy, participation is harder.

Across Wales, the new left speaks the vocabulary of decentralisation but rarely practises it. English remains the medium of minutes, funding bids, and strategy documents. The political project

of localisation is conducted in the language of centralisation. That isn't accidental. It's structural.

For two centuries, capital has concentrated ownership of communication just as it concentrated ownership of land and labour. English became the infrastructure of that concentration: the language of contracts, management, and scale. When industrialisation pulled labour into English-speaking centres, Welsh declined not because people stopped caring but because production moved. As the coalfields and docks expanded, labour migration and recruitment reorganised the Welsh economy around English as the lingua franca of hierarchy.

When English became the language of wages and advancement, Welsh lost its economic footing. As capitalism evolved from industry to services, from production to speculation, the flow of capital moved further from the communities that spoke it. Today, value is extracted through ownership rather than labour: property replaces production, tourism replaces work, and heritage replaces life. The extraction continues, only the mechanism has changed. When profit depends on selling the idea of place rather than sustaining the people in it, language becomes branding.

What's left is a culture detached from its conditions of survival.

To treat Welsh as culture rather than infrastructure is to misunderstand the nature of its decline. As Gareth Miles argued, the future of the language can't be separated from the system that organises work, housing, and ownership. Welsh doesn't disappear because people stop valuing it; it disappears when the means to live through it are taken away. In Marxist terms, culture sits on top of a material base, and when that base is hollowed out by capital, the language built upon it collapses too. Capitalism doesn't just commodify land and labour, it commodifies speech, rewarding the languages of markets and administration while devaluing those of community. A language survives only when its speakers can afford to stay put, when there are jobs and affordable homes. Without

those conditions, “language rights” become decorative: folk songs that no longer belong to the people who sang them.

Devolution gave Wales political institutions without economic sovereignty. The Senedd controls language policy, education, and culture, the symbolic layers of autonomy, while fiscal and industrial power remain elsewhere by design, not accident.

Cymraeg 2050, the government’s target for a million speakers reflects that contradiction. It measures success mainly in numbers and campaigns, not in whether people can actually live and work through the language.

As Colin H. Williams notes in *Wake Me Up in 2050*, the state can provide frameworks for language planning, but alone, they aren’t enough; real revival happens where policy meets community.

Yet even the frameworks are shaped by the logic of managerialism — language as Key Performance Indicator.

Public-sector bilingualism has advanced, but market forces still decide who can afford to live in Welsh-speaking areas. The result is an NGO-ised revival: consultants, awareness campaigns, and a linguistic economy dependent on grants rather than production.

Real language planning would mean economic planning; community-owned housing, decentralised media, universal basic income, translation as public infrastructure.

I’ve had several conversations with people who say that Welsh feels exclusionary. What they’re describing is the moment when power stops being automatic. For those used to living inside the linguistic majority, equality can feel like loss — just as workplace democracy feels slower than management, or community ownership feels messier than the market. It’s not exclusion; it’s redistribution.

To see why that feeling runs so deep, it helps to remember how the imbalance was built.

In Wales, English has long been the language of administration, education, and progress. Welsh became the language of the home, the chapel, and the playground; intimate, local, and undervalued.

When those spheres were eroded by industrial collapse and social atomisation, the language was left without its base. It's important to note that the decline of Welsh wasn't caused by resentment or rejection, but by the slow dismantling of the social and economic structures that once sustained it — families dispersed for work, industries closed, and communities that spoke together were broken apart by the forces of history rather than hostility.

This isn't about blaming freedom of movement. It's about coherence, applying the principles of solidarity and self-determination to language as much as to labour or land. To learn Welsh is to interrupt that one-way traffic of translation that has run for centuries, that being English as default, Welsh as supplement. Every bilingual conversation that begins in Welsh and stays there reverses that flow, if only for a moment. That reversal is what solidarity looks like when it's lived, not just declared.

Solidarity means staying in discomfort long enough to understand it. It means hearing someone speak a language you don't know, yet, and realising the gap is political, not personal. The work is not to demand translation, but to participate in creating the conditions for mutual understanding.

Learning Welsh isn't about heritage or guilt. It's not a sentimental return to the past. It's a material redistribution of the capacity to speak and to be heard. A way of ensuring that public life doesn't belong only to those whose language was never taken from them.

Of course, material conditions are necessary, but not sufficient on their own. People also need to believe the language has a future worth inhabiting. For those who've never spoken it, learning Welsh isn't only resistance, it's a rehearsal for a different kind of belonging, one where the future feels plural again.

A socialist project worthy of the name, must aim to socialise communication itself, to make the means of understanding collective, not proprietary. English has functioned like private property: enclosed, defended, profitable. A democratic future in Wales requires linguistic commons. Spaces where people can deliberate, organise, and disagree without translation being a one-way service. That's what it means to rebuild the public sphere from the margins: to reclaim not only land and labour, but the words that hold them together.

A language cannot survive in an economy that empties its communities. We need *true* democracy. Capital drains those conditions; socialism restores them. The same structures that break unions, break languages. The same speculation that destroys local economies destroys linguistic continuity. The same policies that privatise care privatise culture. Industrial capitalism turned valleys into fuel. Neoliberal capitalism turns landscapes into scenery. Both extract value, both erode speech. A minoritised language cannot live on sentiment. It survives where labour, land, and life still intersect. Where people can afford to create bonds, raise children, and love in their own words.

People often say Welsh is a hard language to learn. It isn't. It's no harder than any other European language. **The difficulty is social, not grammatical. And even if it were hard, so is every act of solidarity that asks you to change.** No one expects fluency overnight. Only commitment and humility. To learn Welsh is to participate in rebuilding the material base of community life. It is to return speech to the people who live on this land, not the markets that price them out. Because solidarity spoken in only one language isn't solidarity at all. It's the old hierarchy rehearsed again under new management.

The alternative is simple: a bilingual movement, a class that can argue, organise, and dream in more than one tongue. Imagine a tenants' union where strike meetings move fluidly between languages, a classroom where local kids and newcomers learn the same grammar of belonging.

The task now is shared, not to rescue Welsh, but to live differently enough that it no longer needs rescuing. That's what solidarity sounds like.