

Rosspport Solidarity Camp and the struggle against Shell

A Community Fighting Back

Sean Mallory

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The Rosspport Solidarity Camp was established in the summer of 2005 and since then has provided an important focus for campaigners travelling to Mayo to support the local struggle. Here we speak to Sean Mallory, a WSM member who has spent a considerable amount of time at the camp, about his experiences. Please note that the views expressed are his own and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Camp.

As we go to press (early January 2007) the campaign against Shell's attempts to force a high-powered gas pipeline through the Rosspport area of Co. Mayo continues.

Can you give a brief overview of the Shell to Sea Struggle so far?

Shell to Sea is opposing the Corrib gas project that proposes to build an on-shore gas refinery nine kilometres inland. This refinery is connected to a gas well out at sea by a production pipeline (contains raw gas). This type of pipeline has never been built before. If ever constructed, it would pass within seventy metres of people's homes.

The initial community campaign opposed the project on health and safety grounds but the campaign analysis has now widened to encompass a critique of democracy in Ireland. This critique also incorporates a critique of the privatisation. The gas fields were given to Shell, Statoil and Marathon pretty much for free including tax write-offs etc. The five-demand charter of the campaign includes a call to renegotiate the deal that gave the multinationals such great terms.

The campaign began in 1999 when the original development plans were finalised. The struggle at that point was through planning authorities and other governmental bodies. By 2005 all appeals through the legal process and the community were exhausted in failure. Decisions in favour of the campaign were overturned and manipulated. Shell and their partners also began the preparatory works at the proposed terminal site.

In June 2005 Shell attempted to start laying the production pipeline through land belong to local farmers. A number of farmers resisted this by blocking a road that Shell needed to access the land. The State gave Shell an injunction, which said that the community had to allow the trucks through. When the community continued their protest, five farmers were imprisoned for 94 days.

This totally backfired on the State and Shell. The campaign grew more militant. In response to the jailing, the community shut down all Shell's sites. The five prisoners were released, on the eve of a national protest, following intense national and international pressure.

The campaign did not stop its daily pickets against Shell and these continued for 18 months until they were forcibly broken by 200 gardai in November 2006. Since then the campaign has faced a vicious campaign of intimidation, harassment and physical abuse from the gardai.

When did activists like yourself get involved?

In June 2005 a gathering was organised by activists from the libertarian movement in Ireland in Rossport. This was on the back of a few individuals building up a relationship with the campaign over the previous months. This gathering was a great success with community activists giving talks and showing people what the issue was about. Contacts were swapped and a few weeks later, in the run up to the jailing, some farmers asked for more on the ground support. A handful of people went and started to lend their support and slowly numbers grew and we set up a camp in late July 2005.

Were you local to the area?

None of us were from the immediate locality; two people were from the same county, living in a town 50 miles away.

What was your initial view or perception of community politics?

I had no experience of working in community-based activism. I had finished college and the only major political involvement I had had was in preparation for the G8 summit in Scotland. I didn't know what to expect. In one way I arrogantly considered myself as a "political activist". I thought I was getting involved in something where I would learn nothing and was imparting knowledge — an expert if you will. This idea was very soon dispelled and I very soon realised that I was going to learn more about activism from the community campaigners than my few years' experience could offer them.

I quite soon began to see libertarian tendencies in the community struggle. These were aspects of libertarianism that most people innately have in them such as solidarity, mutual aid and standing up to authority. This is not to argue the community was libertarian: far from it, just these aspects were obvious to see.

There were also problems, which we saw too. People had trust in the state institutions, such as the police, because most people had never really interacted with them before. This was learned the hard way — by the end of a baton and a boot. But this experience of community politics forever broke me from the myth that there is only one method or path of progressive struggle against capital.

How did you feel getting involved in a community coming from activist-based anarchist experience?

When I first went to Rossport I was paranoid about coming from a libertarian-left anarchist movement. How would people take our involvement? However in many ways this was a perception in my head rather than a real problem. In being involved in college politics and anti-G8 protest, we often get taken up by what the upper classes think of us when we read their press, listen to their radio programs, watch their T.V. We read in the papers how we are something to fear and how we are vicious and threatening. At times anarchists indulge in this so as to feel important. This makes us paranoid, very under- confident in our politics, when dealing with local communities because we sometimes assume they have a similar view of us as the mainstream media. But there is no reason to have this attitude.

In Rossport we didn't go screaming from the rooftops "I'm an anarchist" but at the same token, we are honest about it. That's what people are most impressed with, by the fact that we are honest with them. There are no backroom deals. We say what we think. We act in solidarity as opposed to off our own bat. We don't carry out actions on our own and I think that this has led to a trust.

Of course some people in the community politically disagree with us but that is the nature of life and community politics. I'm sure there are people who question our motivation and suspect some non-existent sinister underlying motive. But the majority respect the solidarity we have given them.

What problems have you encountered?

When I came to this from activism, I assumed most people in a meeting would have a similar understanding of jargon and be at a similar political level. This of course is not true. In a community, by its nature, you have people from all backgrounds and all different life experiences. This is very obvious in Erris where a lot of people have emigrated and since returned and experienced many things while in England, Europe or the US. In local meetings it can at times be difficult and frustrating but a major lesson I learned was that, if people are given time to adjust and not pressurised, they often rise to the occasion.

How democratic is the campaign?

There are between one and two community meetings a week, depending on the campaign pressures. Anyone can attend these meetings and no one is denied access (bar the media occasionally). The issue of democracy is a thorny one. When we arrived in June 2005, there was no community forum. There were just informal meetings in people's houses. In August 2005, regular meetings started to be held. There has never been proper chairing of these meetings and no decision-making structure has been agreed. Therefore working in the campaign can be quite a minefield. This structure served us well when the campaign was quiet. It was almost nothing more than a report back forum and there were rarely any contentious issues. We always failed to have a discussion on long-term strategy, although it was continually raised over the summer. The problem was that the structure couldn't allow decisions like these to be made. When the police broke the picket (see news reports on www.indymedia.ie or www.corribsos.ie) the structure, or indeed structurelessness, was totally inept. We couldn't make decisions either quickly or democratically.

The camp activists certainly collectively aspire to a more democratic structure, but in reality we failed miserably to make it happen. There was no firm decision-making structure; there wasn't any proper chairing or facilitation. Meetings didn't even follow an agenda. We in the camp have on countless times tried to address this but to no avail.

This is not to say that nobody has his or her say. In times of crisis events have moved too fast and people have held informal meetings at the picket. We are currently beginning a process, which many people hope will deliver a structure. It is slow and a case of one step back two steps forward but now we have agendas and minutes which is a step forward.

In tandem with this the issue of a national structure is trying to be rectified. There has been a bit of mistrust between the Erris community and some of the national groups and it is a difficult issue to sort out. It is largely based on miscommunication. This has been manipulated by the Socialist Workers Party who have tried to heighten the divide and make gains for themselves by trying to portray the national groups as hostile to the Erris groups.

What problems does the campaign face now?

The police at the moment pose a major problem. They can beat us black and blue and our bruises will heal, but fear is a much bigger thing to overcome. I think it is easier for those of us who expected this reaction from the state and perhaps have been in confrontational situations before to deal with this. However if fear gets into the community it will be difficult to challenge. You cannot argue logically against fear like you can against a conservative standpoint. Fear is something different. It is difficult to admit that you are afraid. Both people in the local community and, to a lesser extent, activists suffer from this difficulty. It is the aim of the state campaign to intimidate us. We are aware of this and while we have made errors in dealing with it, by no means has it overcome us.

Why is the Rossport struggle important to you?

It might seem like I'm presenting the community as an ideal community engaged in struggle against authoritarianism, the state and corporate power but nothing could be further from the truth. The people of Erris and the wider area are just normal people; farmers, fishermen, builders, whatever. They experience problems, make good decisions, bad decisions. But surely for libertarians that's what it's all about — ordinary people trying to run their lives by taking back their problems from the state and attempting to solve them.

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