

Handouts or Rights?

Workers Solidarity Movement

1995

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IRELAND IS ONE of the thirty richest countries in the world. At the same time, 20% of the population live below the poverty line. The Combat Poverty Agency says that “disparities are widening and will continue to do so in the years ahead”. Yet, instead of providing money to deal adequately with the problems of poverty, for example; drug addiction, homelessness and unemployment, the State gives tax amnesties to the rich, and puts up over £200 million for Larry Goodman.

The material desires of most people – for example a job and a good standard of living, are not provided for. We have no ‘right’ to these things. We are given a welfare system which does not provide a basic minimum for a decent lifestyle, and we have to turn to charities to fill in the gaps.

Charities

And the gap between what people need and what they get is big. There are over 3,700 charities in Ireland, trying to deal with just about every disadvantaged sector in society; from Health and Education to Travellers, women, and children. They all do essential and valuable work. But they are only necessary because the state is not providing these services itself.

The ordinary citizen volunteers the time and money. Most adults in Ireland give to charity more than once a month, amounting to roughly £246 million donated each year. And people devote large amounts of time as well.

Take carers, for example. According to the National Carer’s Association, there are roughly 100,000 carers, looking after people who are severely sick and helpless, but who are not given hospital beds. A typical carer is a housewife looking after one of her relatives, “in many cases, on call 24 hours a day, 7 days a week”.

Insecurity and Competition

The work that carers have to do in Ireland, with a high physical and emotional burden, highlights one problem of leaving the voluntary sector responsible for doing vital social work.

But aside from leaving individuals with large responsibilities there are other problems. The voluntary sector is by its nature insecure. It is reliant on volunteers to put in the time and money. If that time and money is not forthcoming, then the charity folds.

Even voluntary services which receive State donations are not safe. The “Rape Crisis Centre” in Dublin, has nearly collapsed on several occasions due to lack of government funds.

Competition is also a problem that charities have to deal with. People have only so much to give, so charities have to compete with each other for donations.

National Lottery

Since the introduction of the National Lottery, donations to charities have decreased. And the National Lottery, which gives nearly £100 million to various causes, has recently expressed fears that the new British Lottery will take away some of its customers in Northern Ireland.

To quote John Hynes, the Chairman of the National Lottery, “It is still too soon to determine what long term effect the UK games will have on our sales”. Loss of customers means less money to the charities which are dependent on its handouts.

This has direct results. The National Lottery gives one third of its takings to the Department of Health and Welfare. It could mean fewer hospital beds, less money to Women's Aid or less money to the Irish Red Cross. Why should any of these causes suffer at the whim of the consumer? The only way to avoid it is by guaranteeing the right to funding for these services.

And it is 'rights' which is the crux of the whole problem with charities. The existence of a charity to provide a service, means that it is not a 'right' to receive such a service. The service is not guaranteed, it could end due to lack of funds, lack of support, or it could be out competed by another, equally deserving cause.

Rights not Charity

When we say that organisations such as the Irish Wheelchair Association or St Vincent de Paul have a voluntary status, it is another way of saying that we do not have the guaranteed right for such services to exist. We should be lucky that they exist. When the National Lottery gives money for hospital building or a grant for Libraries, we are expected to be grateful instead of regarding it as a right.

Is this the way the state should treat our disadvantaged? Money should be spent on eliminating poverty and providing decent jobs for all. The reliance on the voluntary sector to provide essential services should be eliminated. We deserve rights not charity.

Capitalism, with its "free market" and division of society into exploiters and exploited, can not guarantee such 'rights'. A combination of charity and campaigning for more funding, at the expense of the rich, can bring some small but very real improvements in the lives of the poor. The elimination of poverty, however, requires the replacement of the present system by one where production is organised to satisfy the needs of the many instead of the profit lust of the few. Then mutual aid will do away with the need for charity.

In 1960 the richest 20% of the world's population owned 30% of the wealth, today they own 60%. The annual income of the bottom 50% of the world's population totals £815 billion. That is exactly equal to the amount spent each year on arms, 86% of which are supplied by Britain, the USA, France, Germany and Russia.

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