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Workers Solidarity Movement
Race hate at the Indo
1996

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The recent spate of vicious attacks on old people living alone, which was responsible for some of their deaths, disgusted everyone. In the hysteria which followed, the media looked for scapegoats. As usual, it was not long before some of them went again for the easy targets, Travellers. The Sunday Independent published a number of articles which were virulently racist by any standards. One of these, by that noted right wing sensationalist, Mary Ellen Synon referred to Travellers as “*beasts with no human qualities*”!

This article was withdrawn from the Dublin editions of the paper but circulated in the country and English editions. This was followed by another article by Veronica Guerin quoting unnamed Garda sources as saying that they knew eighty Travellers who were involved in crimes against the elderly.

In response, the Irish Travellers Movement lodged complaints with the Gardai about the offensive and racist content of these articles under the Incitement to Hatred law. Supporters in England and in Northern Ireland also lodged complaints under the Race Relations Act. It remains to be seen if any of these complaints will be upheld.

In the meantime, Travellers have been harassed by the Gardai, their children have had to endure even more abuse than usual — with some now afraid to go to school — and the cause of Travellers' rights has been set back again. The only people charged for these murders were, in fact, settled people and, in one case, relations of the victim.

The Irish Travellers Movement issued a statement condemning the attacks on the elderly and pointing out that Travellers too were horrified by them. The statement continued: "We also condemn that part of the media coverage of these crimes which has singled out and scapegoated the Traveller community. It has created the impression that all or most of these crimes were committed by Travellers and that all or most Travellers are criminals.

"This impression is much more easily created than dispelled and we fear that long-term damage may be done to the work for better inter-community relations and understanding. We call on the National Union of Journalists to censure those members who have engaged in this activity, both journalists and sub-editors.

We call on the Gardai, in this climate of pressure on them to catch the culprits, to ensure the highest possible standards of policing. In the interests of avoiding a miscarriage of justice they must refrain from allowing the anti-Traveller antagonism in the media, combined with the pressure to get results, to translate into suspicion and harassment of Travellers as a whole."

They also called for a boycott of the Independent newspapers for advertisements for jobs which is used extensively by the voluntary and community sector. Again it remains to be seen if this boycott will happen.

A militant picket on the offices of Independent newspapers would have left them in no doubt how decent people felt about their racist journalism.