

Stand up for Travellers Rights

Moate mimics Mississippi

Workers Solidarity Movement

1995

THE PROTESTS against the housing of a Traveller family in Farnagh near Moate were racist. The organisers deny this but then go on to say that their main objection is that they “were not consulted” by the Council about rehousing the family of Alice and Joe Joyce. Do these same people expect to be “consulted” everytime a settled family is given a house? Of course not.

One of the ringleaders, local priest Fr Liam Farrell, even claimed that the protesters were concerned for the family, worried about their transition from an urban to a rural area! More honest was the one who told journalists that he did not want “inferior people” in his town.

This gang of racists held their meetings in St Patrick’s Hall (which is under the control of Fr Liam Farrell, who also represented the racists at meetings with Westmeath County Manager Jack Taaffe), and in a room attached to the Auld Shebeen pub. Knowing full well they were doing nothing to be proud of, they organised everything anonymously.

At their meetings they threatened to withdraw children from the two national schools if any of the Joyce children were admitted. Similar threats worked at nearby Clonbunny recently when locals heard that Traveller children were to be admitted.

The mob blocked the main Dublin-Galway road for two hours but, despite this being illegal, there was no garda action. And given the way the ruling class treats Travellers that was no surprise.

Antagonism towards the Joyces was whipped up with claims that “Travellers contribute nothing to society” and “wherever there are Travellers there is trouble”. Exactly the same kind of hatemongering that was used against blacks in the American deep south thirty years ago.

Scapegoats are great for diverting attention away from problems like unemployment, low wages and poor housing. When you look closely you will usually find wealthy vested interests behind racist agitation.

Who was behind all the trouble in Moate? Who was on the secret committee? Alongside the priest were stud farm owner Michael Scott, shopkeeper Mary Flynn, Fine Gael councillor Tom Flanagan, restaurant boss John Joe Claffey, supermarket owner Seamus Dolan and farmer Mick Kelly. In other words the type of people who live the good life at the expense of both Travellers and working class people.

Even middle class liberals get sucked into seeing Travellers, rather than the discrimination they face, as the “problem”. Nell McCafferty writing in the Sunday Tribune on June 11th said “there has been, equally, no official acknowledgement from government about the way a national social problem has been landed in dark of night – without warning or attempt to prepare opinion – upon the people of Moate”.

Would she have come out with the same crap if it was another group of people who were being picked on by the bigots, if it was Bosnian refugees, or Pakistanis or Jews? Of course not.

We can protest against racism in other countries (and we should protest against it) but we also need to confront it at home. It is not enough to decry the electoral success of the fascist National Front in France or the murderous anti-black attacks of the British National Party if we stand aside and ignore the problem on our own doorsteps.

Anti-racists have to take a stand in their own communities when the racists and their politician pals try to stir things up. In Ireland’s wealthiest constituency it is ‘liberal’ Progressive Democrat TD Liz O’Donnell who is stirring up opposition to the temporary halting site in Sandyford. In Navan it is Democratic Left’s Christy Gorman who objected to the extension of the only official halting site in County Meath, and labelled Travellers “brutal, savage and threatening”.

It is well past the time when these bullies in suits were told where to get off. In opposition to their bigotry we have to publicly support Travellers rights to appropriate housing and services, we have to recognise that they have a cultural tradition that is as valid as any other.

We start by taking a stand every time we witness discrimination. If a shop, cinema, disco or pub refuses to serve somebody because they are a Traveller we make sure the management knows they won’t get our custom and we walk out. Inside the MANDATE and SIPTU trade unions we should fight to commit our unions to defending any worker who refuses to operate blanket bans on any group of customers because of their race or ethnicity. In the local authority trade unions we should work to get the same protection for workers who refuse to be involved in evictions.

Three decades of polite appeals to ‘liberal’ politicians have changed little for Travellers. It is up to anti-racists, trade unionists and other ordinary working class people to join with Travellers and deal a crushing blow to the politics of discrimination. As Jim Larkin was fond of saying, “an injury to one is the concern of all”.

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