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Union Resistance and the Leadership of Ideas

Alan Davis

15 December 2010

We are delighted to publish this article in response to an article published in Irish Anarchist Review 1. To promote debate and discussion among anarchists and the left on the common problems we face, such letters and articles are always welcome.

Andrew Flood's article "Capitalist crisis and union resistance in Ireland" (IAR 1) calls for a "*debate on where we should put our energy*". This is a contribution to that debate. Andrew outlines the framework of the economic crisis and the balance of forces as the Irish workers' movement attempts to respond to attacks by the bosses and their state. While the exact details of the government's December budget are currently unclear, doubtless it will once again involve a massive attack on the living standards of working people.

The recent Croke Park sell-out shows that the trade-union leaders have no perspective of abandoning their "social partnership" policy of collaboration with the government and bosses. Working people cannot look to these bureaucrats to defend us. It is

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Retrieved on 20th December 2021 from www.wsm.ie

Published in the *Irish Anarchist Review* Issue 2.

usa.anarchistlibraries.net

the responsibility of revolutionaries to help organise rank-and-file opposition to the attacks and this depends on organising political opposition to the pro-capitalist ideology of the official union leadership. Andrew provides a self-critical and plausible assessment of where revolutionaries might effectively concentrate limited resources. But the goal should not be to act merely as the best organisers of trade-union and community struggles or simply push workers towards greater militancy. As the WSM position paper on trade-union work argues: *“9.2 Our most immediate aim in any strike is to win a victory. But it is not our sole aim. We are political militants and not just good trade unionists, we argue our politics. We seek to win support for our politics, we seek to win members to our organisation.”*

Those who fail to actively advance revolutionary politics within the unions can only end up as syndicalists and, ultimately, reformists. Unfortunately, the one-sided emphasis of Andrew’s article on technical organisational issues points in that direction. Revolutionaries aim to provide the militant layers of the workers’ movement with what the WSM calls a “road map” to the revolutionary transformation of society. Workers need a militant programme that links defence against immediate attacks to a strategic perspective of the seizure of power by the working class, through organs such as workers’ councils. At every step revolutionaries seek to develop the capacity of the working class to assert its power – from simple picket-line militancy, to the assertion of workers’ control over production in particular enterprises, and ultimately to the expropriation of the means of production and the establishment of the hegemony of institutions of proletarian political-military power.

Presenting a clear revolutionary road map requires maintaining political independence from non-revolutionary tendencies in the workers’ movement (whether they call themselves socialist or libertarian) combined with a non-sectarian policy of participation in campaigns on commonly agreed issues along with other activists

within the workers' movement irrespective of their overall political programmes. Internationalism must stand at the heart of a revolutionary perspective. This is not an abstract or moral question; it must be integral to our fight here and now. Ireland's economy is dominated by multinationals, and our struggles cannot be separated from those of workers in Britain and across Europe. The power of the multinationals can lead to illusions in the conception of "we the Irish people". This petty nationalism stands in contradiction to one of the cornerstones of the road map to revolution – political independence of the working class from all wings of the capitalists. To the extent that a movement of significant size is built against the attacks, it can be expected that we will have to confront bourgeois populist ideas like Gerry Adams' call for a "*progressive and democratic movement for our country – one that aims to meet the needs of all citizens*" (Sinn Fein's Ard Fheis 2009). The bosses aim to use nationalism to reduce wages and conditions by setting workers of different nationalities against each other, by promoting nationalist and/or racist ideas. We must make no concessions to this. The answer of revolutionary militants in the workers' movement must be to uphold the equality of Irish-born and immigrant workers on the basis of full citizenship rights for all, including jobs and benefits. European-wide trade unions need to be built as a step towards conscious co-ordination of the workers' movement across national boundaries. Without an internationalist perspective it will be impossible to successfully beat back the immediate attacks, let alone carry out the revolutionary seizure of power.

Mass unemployment is likely to be a feature of the Irish economy for the foreseeable future and the hardship faced by those affected will only deepen as a result of expected attacks on social welfare and further increases in indirect taxation. We need to convince employed workers to use their industrial strength to defend our brothers and sisters who are reliant on social welfare payments, and to fight for an effective answer to unemployment, redistributing the total hours of work required among those able to work, with no

loss in pay. The workers' movement also needs to lead the fight against evictions and repossessions, building a movement able to seize empty houses all over the country to house the homeless, as a first step to quality affordable social housing for all. We are facing a generalised attack on working people and we need a generalised response – which, in situations of rising class struggle, can take the form of a general strike. A successful general strike would need to use serious methods, such as implementing the key principle “*picket lines mean don't cross!*” It would be necessary to elect strike committees in every workplace, whether unionised or not, with effective co-ordination through meetings of delegated representatives at local, regional and national levels. Valuable lessons about building workers' councils could be learnt in the process. Such methods of self-organisation will take place in opposition to betrayals being carried out by the existing leadership of the workers' movement, but what is essential in the long run is a political struggle to defeat the pro-capitalist ideology of the bureaucrats by winning the most advanced elements of the working class to a programme of revolutionary class struggle. The seemingly endless “*re-capitalisation*” of the banks has led to what the government is calling an “*outflow of funds*”, as the rich transfer public subsidies to tax havens around the world. We need to win the workers' movement to an understanding that the only effective solution to such dodges is through the expropriation (without compensation) of the entire capitalist class.

A revolutionary transformation of society is impossible without dismantling the bourgeois state – the cops, courts and armed forces as well as the prison and private security systems. The recognition that the capitalist state is not a neutral instrument informs the strategic perspective of the seizure of power and also impacts on our immediate struggles. The use of private security in an attempt to stop the initial Waterford Glass occupation; the police raid on Thomas Cooke workers; and the actions of private and public police thugs in Erris are all concrete examples of why we

need to organise effective working-class self-defence bodies. Revolutionaries must provide a clear alternative to ideas like “*community control of the police*” or the notion that there is some moral imperative that prohibits workers and the oppressed from taking whatever steps are necessary against the violence of the bosses and their hired thugs. Unity within the workers' movement is imperative to effectively struggle against the capitalists – but there are different kinds of unity. Revolutionaries participate in united-front campaigns and defensive struggles in the trade unions on the basis of immediate concrete demands capable of mobilising broad participation. Unity around such limited objectives will necessarily be at a lower level of political agreement than that of a revolutionary organisation. However, revolutionaries also need to be able to work with militants who aren't yet ready to join the revolutionary organisation and, through common struggle, have an opportunity to win them to broader understanding of the issues posed. Building programmatically based “*affinity groups*” in the workplace around common agreement over the key elements of the road map to working-class power should be an important arena of work for a revolutionary organisation. Such groups would struggle for the implementation of workers' democracy against the bureaucratic control of the trade-union leaders – not just because it is the most effective way to build a fighting movement against the immediate attacks, but because it is consistent with, and lays the basis for, the future building of workers' councils.

Andrew is quite right that “*we should have ambitions way beyond trying to build what amount to small affinity groups of like-minded workers in a couple of workplaces*” but revolutionaries must also have a sober analysis of our political responsibilities and activity. Mass proletarian insurrection will only become reality if revolutionary ideas gain ascendancy in the working class. The chief means for undertaking this work today is through programmatically based “*affinity groups*” in the trade unions linked to the revolutionary organisation.