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The Euro: the root of all evil?

Andrew Flood

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The arrival of the Euro in its 'real' form of notes and coins is a key step along the path towards European unification. In Ireland, at least, it was virtually unopposed save for a few nostalgic articles about missing the artistry of the old notes and coins.

The Irish media presents a uniform picture of the growth of the EU in which ministers argue about fish quotas but there is otherwise little disagreement. The vote against the Nice treaty in Ireland however demonstrates there are very large numbers of people suspicious about the EU project. But you would be hard pushed to find any explanation of what this suspicion is.

In so far as we get any explanation there is a vague idea that Nice was voted down because of the anti-freedom, anti women bigots in groups like Youth Defence somehow managed to trick people into voting no. This is an angle that suits the government but does not stand up to any real examination. These forces have always been anti-Europe yet until Nice European referenda were easily carried. And in general Irish society in the last decades has moved to greater rather than less respect for the individual freedoms of women, gays and all the other groups the bigots despise.

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European unification has always had mixed results in Ireland. Certain elements, particularly those that gave limited support to the struggles for individual rights, were quite welcome. Others like the growing formal ties to European militarisation were less welcome but realistically Ireland's 'neutrality' has always been a bit of a pro-British/American joke. And most of the economic arguments were little more than arguments between the gombeen and international sections of the boss class that are meaningless to Irish workers.

Irish Anarchists have for the most part insisted that we are against aspects of the way European unification is being, not the idea of unification. In many ways it should be welcomed by workers as a move away from the old nationalisms of the 20th century. And also of course European unification was one of the key goals of the workers' movements before the war of 1914 smashed such hopes in the trenches.

As with other aspects of globalisation there is the globalisation that the bosses wish to accept and the globalisation that the workers need to impose. For example, the freedom of anyone anywhere on the planet to travel where ever they like free of border controls.

The EU is key to the bosses' process of capitalist globalisation. In a general sense European Unification is providing the motor by which workers' rights are being reduced to a point near the bottom of the European average and through which massive industrial and transport projects are being imposed on reluctant populations who are also forced to pay for them. Here it provides a handy excuse for the Irish State when it comes to trying to impose regressive taxes like the Bin tax.

The decision making structure of the European Union is not widely understood. In general all we see are the summits where the leaders of the European states come together to finalise documents that have been negotiated over the previous years in the shadows.

Lurking in these shadows is a deeply undemocratic process. Many proposals start off in a rather shadowy body also based in Brussels called the 'European Round Table of Industrialists' (ERT). This elite club, formed in 1983 brings together 45 top European corporations like ICI, BP, Shell, Renault, Bayer, Unilever and Nestlé. Ireland is 'represented' by Michael Smurfit of Jefferson Smurfit¹.

Perhaps this line up alone explains some of the pro-car and oil industry decisions that the EU has made in favouring motorway construction over freight trains for the long distance transport of goods? The ERT has also been pushing the World Trade Organisation agenda with the circles of the European bureaucracy.

Many of the provisions of the Single European Act (SEA), for instance, originated in the ERT document "*Europe 1990 – A program for action*". The SEA with its emphasis on a European free trade zone that would lead to further concentration of production in the most developed regions and the centralisation of production. The European Commissioner for the Environment estimated that because it also favoured road (rather than rail) transport it would lead to a 50% increase in heavy road haulage by 2000, some 17 million more vehicles².

One of the components of this transport policy, the 'TENS' will mean 13,000 km² of new roads. This leads to massive pollution and a waste of resources as goods are transported over crazy distances. One German study found that while the necessary components to produce and package strawberry yoghurt could all be sourced within a radius of 50 miles they were in fact transported over 7,000 miles³.

This sort of crazy policy which results in pollution only makes sense when you understand it has been imposed in the interests of

¹ ERT membership is on their web page at www.ert.be

² Restructuring and Resistance (available from the WSM bookservice for 13 Euros), p47

³ Ibid, p147

the European corporations. A 1999 WHO report on Health costs due to road traffic-related air pollution revealed that car-related pollution kills more people than car accidents in Austria, France and Switzerland⁴.

The act also favoured large-scale industrial farming, which requires huge energy and chemical inputs (again good for the likes of ICI and Shell). European research money, paid for by the taxes of European workers, was directed towards genetic engineering, biotechnology and the chemical pharmaceutical industry rather than towards minimising unemployment or environmental degradation. Baron Daniel Janssen of the ERT describes the EC decision making structures as “*extremely open to the business community, so that when businessmen like me face an issue that needs political input we have access to excellent Commissioners such as Monti for competition, Lamy for world trade, and Liikanen for electronic commerce and industry*”⁵.

It’s estimated that Brussels hosts some 500 industry lobby groups employing some 10,000 professional lobbyists. 1999 for instance saw a multi-million Euro lobbying campaign by the biotech companies which saw the introduction of the industry friendly ‘Patents on life’ directive.

It makes no sense for us to oppose the EU on the basis of some sort of return to national sovereignty. Rather we must look for ways to create our globalisation agenda out of the process. The protests at the European Summits are proving one way of doing this. At the December summit in Brussels between 60,000 and 100,000 took part in the Trade Union organised demonstration alone. These protests can also be one of the ways in which we build links across Europe and create our alternative.

⁴ See www.foa.org

⁵ Restructuring and Resistance , p66