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The Heroin menace

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DUBLIN is currently experiencing a heroin epidemic similar to the one that hit the north and south inner-city in the late 1970s. That epidemic left hundreds of young people hooked on heroin and dozens of them have since died of AIDS and AIDS related diseases. Some big criminals made fortunes out of it.

The Dunnes managed to stay at large long enough to cause devastation in the tightly knit working class communities of the north and south inner city. People in these areas were already devastated by high rates of unemployment, bad housing rampant crime and a decaying environment. = Less than half a mile from the fancy hotels and shops of the city centre, people lived and still live in poverty and often in despair.

The massive working class bias of heroin worldwide makes it stand apart from all other drugs whatever about its addictive quality. The lives of a whole generation of inner city youth was blighted by the heroin epidemic of the late 70s and early 1980s. Today young people are dying with frightening regularity in these communities, sometimes leaving young kids to be reared by their grandparents. This is the ultimate in capitalist logic – young kids turning to a

killer drug in their hundreds to lessen the despair of their hopeless futures in this society.

In the early 80s, the official response to the heroin crisis was muddled and ineffective. After all it was only the communities of the inner city that were effected and we all know that no-one important lives there. The community response however was much more decisive. Concerned Parents Against Drugs (CPAD) was set up and quickly gained support in both the north and south inner city and Ballymun where some of the pushers had moved.

CPAD marched on the houses of known pushers and sometimes forcibly evicted them. Pushers were denounced at public meetings and ordered to leave the community. From the beginning there was hassle between the CPAD and the cops. This culminated in the arrest of John Whacker Humphreys and others who were tried in the Special Criminal Court where there is no jury and he was sentenced to prison and taken to Portlaoise. This hassle was partly because Sinn Fein was closely associated with the CPAD in some areas but also because they were challenging the authority of the cops and therefore the state in enforcing the law by doing what the cops wouldn't or couldn't do.

However, there were problems with CPAD in some areas. One example was in Crumlin where they de-generated quickly into vigilantes who took to hassling anyone in the community who was different or lived any kind of an alternative life-style. There was also the problem that often all they were doing was moving the pushers from on area to another.

The biggest problem was that, in the beginning anyway, they did not differentiate between pushers and addicts. People did not know as much about heroin addiction then and certainly not as much about AIDS, and there were practically no treatment programmes in existence for addicts. CPAD sometimes did not distinguish between hard and soft drugs either. People were harassed for smoking dope in some areas. However, despite its very real

faults, CPAD was a progressive response to the heroin epidemic at that time.

The present situation is very different. AIDS and H.I.V. are the main reasons that it is so different. So many families in the inner city have had someone either die of AIDS or become H.I.V. positive that it is now part of the community. In this situation people are reluctant to go for the tactics of the CPAD again because it is their own brothers and sisters and sons and daughters that would be targeted.

A revival of CPAD-type organisation seems to be happening in the south inner city at the moment where there was a recent march to “keep our communities free from drugs”. People do need to organise to defend their communities from heroin, AIDS and drugs wars. However this time around there needs to be a clear distinction made between pushers and addicts.

The recent survey of H.I.V. positive people in Dublin [Building Positively published by the Round Tower Housing Association, February 1994] shows that a very high proportion of them are either homeless or in very bad privately rented flats, and that the biggest single reason why they are in that state was that they had been harassed out of their homes by vigilantes because of their drug use and because they were H.I.V. positive.

The Corporation now will not house people defined as anti-social and a lot of drug users get defined in this way. People who are often very sick and dying in some cases are being harassed out of their homes because they are addicted to heroin. There is no easy solution because addicts sometimes push drugs and sometimes are into theft to pay for their addiction and they can make terrible neighbours. But simply throwing them out of their homes and communities and not calling for treatment programmes, and that means needle exchanges and methadone maintenance centres in the area where they live, is not acceptable to anarchists.

Heroin addicts are victims of capitalism and should not be made scapegoats. People need to focus on the lousy conditions that cre-

ate heroin addiction and to fight and organise around them. Anarchists believe that heroin should be decriminalised and available to addicts on prescription. Heroin is different to most other drugs because it is used intravenously and has led, though sharing needles, to users becoming HIV+.

The distinction between “hard” and “soft” drugs changes all the time with the arrival of new kinds of drugs. As anarchists the distinction we make is between drugs that have a bad effect on users and the wider community, and those that don't. Heroin addiction leads to crime and violence, and it is working class communities who have to bear the brunt of it. It also leads to HIV infection and AIDS. It kills people. This makes it an anti-social drug.

We are not in favour of more punitive legislation as a response. That has changed nothing. One only has to look at the number of junkies who go into Mountjoy jail and come out still addicted. Indeed many young prisoners have gone in never having used heroin but come out addicted. The state has been more concerned with appearing to do something rather than actually doing it. It has been a case of scapegoats rather than solutions.

Anarchists are fighting for the sort of world where nobody will ‘need’ to escape from reality through self-destructive addiction. Until this is achieved we will support communities who want to defend themselves from heroin pushers and anti-social behaviour.