

# **Travellers Fight Back**

**Racism in Ireland**

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**Irish Travellers are a very small minority group in Ireland, constituting less than 1% of the population. Their numbers currently stand at approx. 23,000 people in the Republic and another 1,500 in the North. There are also an estimated 15,000 Irish Travellers in England, Scotland and Wales and 7,000 in the U.S.A.**

The population structure of the Traveller community resembles that of a third world country, with large numbers of children and very few in the older age group. Poor health status, compounded by racist policies and practices, and exclusion from mainstream society are the causes of this situation. 50% of the population is under 15 years. Some health statistics revealed by the Health Status Report of the Health Research Board in 1987 are worth quoting;

- Travellers have more than double the national rate of stillbirths.
- Infant mortality rates are three times higher than the national rate.
- Traveller women live, on average, 12 years less than settled women.
- Traveller men live, on average, 10 years less than settled men.
- Travellers' life expectancy is now at the level that settled people reached in the 1940's.

These are the statistics of racism, clearly demonstrating that Travellers' lives are effected in the most basic ways by their exclusion and marginalisation. Statistics relating to their educational levels reveal the same pariah status. Less than 14% currently make it into post-primary education and the number who have made it into third level can still be counted on one hand. The majority of the adults, 80%, are illiterate.

## **Ethnicity & Cultural Identity**

Travellers constitute a distinct ethnic group within Irish society. They fulfil all the criteria internationally accepted as defining ethnicity:

- A long shared history of which the group is conscious.
- A cultural tradition of its own including family and social customs.
- Descent from common ancestors — you must be born into the group.
- A common language.
- A common religion.
- Being a minority, or an oppressed or dominated group, within a larger community.

There has been strong resistance to acknowledging Travellers' ethnicity even from people who admit that they do not know what the term means. This attitude stems from the endemic racism towards them which rejects any idea that they could be anything other than *failed settled people*. There is a fear that if Travellers' claim to separate ethnicity is conceded that allegations of racism which are currently dismissed out of hand in most circles, would have some credence.

The racism practised against Travellers in Ireland is so all pervasive that it is not recognised as such except by a small minority of progressive people. Most left-wing groups either ignore the issue or contribute to the racism themselves by adopting reactionary positions. Travellers are marginalised and excluded from all of the institutions and structures of Irish society. The racism they experience operates at both the individual and the institutional level.

At an institutional level Travellers have to sign for the dole and for welfare at separate times. In the case of Dublin, Travellers claiming welfare from the Health Board have to do so at a completely separate and segregated clinic. Travellers have to use a separate, segregated, social work service and they are often segregated into separate classes in school. Socially, they are excluded from almost every pub in the country. They are routinely refused service in shops, cafes, cinemas, laundrettes and every recreational and social outlet.

Over the past 18 months, there has been a substantial increase in physical and ideological attacks on them. Incidents recorded include an elderly couple attacked on the beach in Bantry, Co.Cork, by hired thugs with hurley sticks who left the woman with a broken nose. A family was burned out of their caravan in Bray, Co. Wicklow. Travellers were subjected to an organised physical attack in Glenamaddy, Co. Galway, for having the cheek to drink in one of the few pubs that served them. This pub has since lost its licence as a warning to other publicans not to serve Travellers.

The list goes on and covers all parts of the country and every situation where Travellers attempt to live their lives. On an individual level, there is almost total segregation between Travellers and the sedentary population. Social contact is minimal because Travellers have been excluded from such contact.

The effects of this racism are not hard to find. Most Travellers lack self-esteem. Pride in their cultural identity is a very new experience and confined to the minority who have had some adult education and training. Self-destructive and even anti-social behaviour arises out of this total experience of racism. Less than 14% of Travellers currently make it into post-primary education and the majority of the adults are illiterate. Organising politically in this situation is difficult but not impossible as this article will demonstrate.

Irish Travellers share strong cultural ties with other nomadic people especially Gypsies and Travellers in other countries. Within the E.U., Travellers and Gypsies currently form a population of over one million people. Another million live in Eastern Europe.

These groups have faced, and still face, vicious persecution and racism which reached its peak this century with the murder of over a quarter of a million Gypsies and Travellers by the Nazis. Gypsies and Travellers in Eastern Europe are experiencing brutal racist attacks at the moment. Anti-immigrant agitation and attacks are specifically directed at them in several European countries.

## **Travellers' resistance**

Organised resistance to their oppression is almost certain to have existed at several points in their history. However, the recorded history of this illiterate, nomadic, despised group scarcely existed until the early 1960's in this country. An English journalist, Grattan Puxon, arrived here to live and was immediately struck by the situation of the Travellers. Over the next five years he was involved in organising the Irish Traveller Community, which organised protests and resisted

evictions all over the country. Puxon produced a number of pamphlets, the best known of which was titled *The Victims*. This protest movement quickly gained momentum, especially around the tactic of resisting evictions. Support grew both from Travellers themselves, and from students and some left wing activists.

A large group of Travellers based at Cherry Orchard in Dublin, where Puxon himself lived, built what was the first Travellers' school on the site. Dublin Corporation bulldozed it down within three weeks, setting off a wave of protest marches and pickets.

The movement for civil rights for Travellers was gaining strength and confidence and alarming the Government. The Irish Traveller Community held a large public rally at Ballinasloe fair in 1963 at which a committee was elected and plans made to organise throughout the country.

Around the same time, Gratton Puxon was arrested and charged with possessing explosives. He was given the choice of facing a lengthy jail sentence or leaving the country. It was later revealed that the explosives had been planted in his home by the police. Puxon left Ireland in 1964. Dozens of Traveller families left with him and went on to help form the Gypsy Council in England, where they played a prominent role over the next decade.

In Ireland, however, a deal had been done to allow a group of clerics and wealthy philanthropists to represent Travellers' interests. Called the Itinerant Settlement Committee, this group sidetracked Travellers' struggles into endless lobbying and charity work. Over the next twenty years they ensured there was little or no Traveller input into the matters that concerned them.

The next sign of any independent resistance came in 1980 when a Traveller woman, Roselle McDonald, went to court to try to stop the constant evictions from one roadside camp to another which were a feature of Travellers' lives. She won a ruling that Travellers could not be evicted from local authority property without being offered a suitable alternative. Although it was hailed as a great victory at the time, in practice it did not take the authorities long to find ways around it. Usually this was achieved by simply harassing the families through tactics like dumping everything from rubbish to manure beside their caravans. This left them with no option but to move.

In 1981, Dublin County Council tried to open the new Tallaght By-pass, home to over 100 Traveller families, without offering them any alternative site. The events which followed in Tallaght were to be repeated on a smaller scale all over the country. Local residents, with the active support of some local politicians, including a Fianna Fáil councillor, organised protest marches. Vigilante type gangs patrolled around all open space in the area in order to force Travellers out of Tallaght.

A small number of local activists joined with a small number of Travellers to resist this racism and formed the Travellers' Rights Committee. This committee existed for almost two years until it gave way to the first ever 'Traveller only' organisation, Minceir Misli, set up in 1983. The Travellers Rights Committee put up a Traveller candidate, Nan Joyce, in the general election of 1982. She ran against the straightforwardly racist 'community' candidate who stood on a ticket of *Get the Knackers out of Tallaght*. She got twice as many first preference votes. A few weeks after the election Nan Joyce was arrested and charged with theft of jewellery. This was widely reported in the papers with headlines such as *Tinker Queen arrested for theft*. The charges were dropped because of lack of evidence when it came to court. It turned out that the stolen jewellery had been planted in her caravan by the police themselves in an exact repetition of the frame up they had done on Grattan Puxon over twenty years previously.

The protests against Travellers in Tallaght were threatening and violent affairs. Leaflets were distributed in the doors advising men to leave women and children at home and to bring hurley sticks. No Travellers were physically attacked on these protests, mainly because of the small but highly visible and determined pickets supporting the Travellers.

Minceir Misli lasted almost two years. During this time it organised protest marches, hunger strikes, pickets, and spoke at numerous meetings around the country to galvanise support for Travellers' demands. They initiated contact with the trade unions and, in some unions, got resolutions passed instructing members not to take part in evictions.

However, Minceir Misli was outside consensus politics from the outset and as such could not get access to any funding to carry out its work. In addition, almost all its members were illiterate which made it extremely difficult for them to function effectively. When it folded, the Dublin Travellers' Education and Development Group (DTEDG) was formed in 1984. However, this group was not set up as an agitational one, so there was a vacuum in Traveller resistance once again. The Irish Travellers' Movement (ITM) was set up in 1990 as a lobby and pressure group composed of both settled people and Travellers. However, its interventions to date have been characterised by extreme caution. There is no group with a direct action focus at the moment, even though the number of physical and racist attacks have escalated over the past two years.

There have been so many attacks over the past two years that it would take many more pages to list them all. It should be remembered that the Traveller population is very small, so that the impact of this level of physical attacks on such a small community is intense. It generates fear within the whole group and causes further isolation. The better known incidents include:

Bray, Co. Wicklow: Traveller family burnt out of their caravan parked on the edge of a housing estate. Their van was then burnt. Protests prevented them from being offered another site locally. This happened in February 1995.

Glenamaddy, Co. Galway: In April 1994, Travellers were subjected to an organised attack by local people armed with hurley sticks and clubs. Travellers drinking in the Four Roads pub were lined up by police and thrown out to a 'lynch mob' of locals. Their vans were turned over and wrecked. One Traveller woman described hiding out in a field all night with her young daughter in fear of being attacked. This episode was provoked by the fact that the owner of this pub persisted in serving Travellers despite police threats, which eventually succeeded, that she would lose her licence.

Most recently, in June 1995 a Traveller family housed in Moate Co. Westmeath have been the focus of anti-Traveller racism. Locals here held public meetings and blocked the main Galway to Dublin road in protest against the Council's decision to house the Travellers a mile outside *their* town. Travellers were called *inferior people*.

The only response from the establishment to this latest outrage was an intervention by the Catholic Bishop (who *understood* the bigots concerns). Anti-racist activity was restricted to a spate of letters and articles in the papers. A situation such as this requires a direct action response but no group is currently in a position to organise it.

## **Why this increase in Racism?**

There has been some speculation in the papers (Fintan O'Toole, Irish Times 16.6.95) about the increase in anti-Traveller agitation over the past two years or so. The fact is that such agitation

and bigotry was always there and has surfaced on numerous occasions. Travellers housed in Ragoon in Galway twenty five years ago were subjected to such harassment that the term *Ragoonery* became part of the vocabulary for a time. Travellers in other parts of the country had gunfire directed at them and pig slurry thrown over their caravans.

There seems to have been an increase in racist attacks but this could also be that they are being reported more. The struggles of the various groups described in the previous section for civil rights for Travellers has undoubtedly increased awareness of these issues among people generally. Over the past ten years the emergence of a small number of articulate, politically active Travellers has raised the issue higher on the political agenda. The concepts of ethnic identity and cultural difference have also raised the temperature of the debate. Until fairly recently, Travellers and their supporters were essentially fighting for little more than an end to the worst forms of discrimination. In many cases, especially where middle class do-gooders and liberal clergy were involved, they were appealing to a charity motivation.

However the situation is now very different with Traveller groups throughout the country asserting their right to be treated with respect as an ethnic and cultural minority with their own beliefs, customs and values. By adopting this strategy, Travellers are finally aligning themselves with the struggles of nomadic and indigenous peoples everywhere. Apart from their close affinity with Gypsies and Travellers worldwide, their struggles now have much in common with those of Native Americans, Aboriginal peoples in Australia, and Maoris of New Zealand, as well as indigenous people in South America. It is this new and very unacceptable (to the bigots) demand for respect as a cultural and ethnic minority that has fuelled the latest outburst of racism against them.

Over the past decade, these concepts gained credibility with a wider range of people. Racist descriptions and abuse in the media have been consistently challenged, with the result that Travellers rights as a separate minority group had begun to gain acceptance in wider circles. Once it was no longer acceptable to define them either as objects of charity or as failed settled people in need of social work and rehabilitation, the alternative was to accept them as different with all the rights and appropriate services they require to live decently in accordance with their cultural values. That such a prospect has proved to be totally unacceptable to many settled people is obvious.

Fianna Fáil Senator Marian McGennis, interviewed for a recent survey stated that Martin Collins, a Traveller activist closely associated with the concepts of cultural and ethnic identity, was responsible for all the anti-Traveller feeling and agitation in the country because he insisted in demanding rights for Travellers! Ridiculous though this statement is, it captures what many settled people really feel.

Ironically, settled society has always considered Travellers to be both different and inferior. Now that Travellers are asserting their right to be different but not inferior, they have provoked outrage.

## **Issues for Travellers**

The key issues for Travellers remain the standard ones of civil rights campaigns: decent appropriate accommodation, access to good quality appropriate education — including adult education because so many of them missed out completely on education as children, appropriate

easily accessible health care, and equality of access to all public and private services on a non-discriminatory basis. Central to all these demands is the recognition and resourcing of their cultural identity.

Effective anti-racist and anti-discrimination legislation is put forward as a solution to some of the problems Travellers face but the history of legislation such as the 1967 Race Relations Act in Britain shows that this is no solution. Self-determination is another key issue for Travellers and is complicated by the fact that so many adult Travellers have little or no formal education. The fact that they are such a tiny minority also means that they need the support of other more powerful forces in their struggle.

## Current Strategies

Strategies being pursued by the ITM and most of the Traveller support groups are similar to those pursued by all of the major movements for social change over the past fifty years. Lobbying, influencing policy and legislation, public awareness and education through the media and through workshops and seminars aimed at different groups within the community along with consciousness raising and training for Travellers are the main activities of these groups. There has been some direct action too with pickets of insurance companies who refuse to insure Travellers and several protest marches against the continued lack of accommodation and civil rights.

However, these actions have been few, especially in view of the recent blatant and vicious rise in racist attacks. Whatever mood for radical and direct action strategies there is among Travellers themselves has been mostly neutralised by professional community workers. A great deal of faith has been invested in such activities as the Government's Task Force on the Traveller community, which published its report this summer after nearly two years deliberation. This is despite the fact that there have been reports before, as long ago as the 1963 *Report of the Commission on Itinerancy* which produced nothing useful or effective. A great deal of energy and time has been diverted into this kind of tactic at the expense of building up a strong, assertive direct action movement among Travellers and their supporters.

Throughout Europe there is some mobilisation taking place among Gypsy and Traveller groups but most of this is now of a defensive nature. Three Gypsies were killed by a bomb thrown into their site in Austria earlier this year by neo-nazis. Two of those killed were survivors of the nazi death camps where a quarter of a million Gypsies and Travellers were murdered. This outrage did not even make the papers here. In most countries Gypsies and Travellers are so despised that events such as these are not reported even by the left wing press. Racism against Travellers in Europe has increased with the opening up of Eastern Europe where there has always been a very large Gypsy and Traveller population living in oppressed and poverty stricken conditions. Thousands of these people are now trying to move into Western Europe to achieve a better life. They are the first of these immigrants to be harassed and sent back and physically attacked and even killed when they do manage to get into Germany or any other western country.

In France, Gypsies and Travellers cannot be citizens of the state. They cannot have passports, only travel papers which they must register with the police when they want to travel outside France. Even within, France they must register with the police when they travel. In Austria, the Catholic Church set up a special organisation called Pro Juventute to kidnap the children of Gypsies and Travellers and gave them as slave labour to Austrian farmers. This practice went on



into the 1970s and was justified by spokespeople for the church even later. The Austrian Gypsy population was almost wiped out by this practise with Gypsy parents spending years vainly trying to find their children whose names and identities had been changed.

The situation of Irish Travellers is now one of crisis on several fronts. Basic accommodation, education and health needs are hopelessly inadequate despite the tiny size of the Traveller population. But it is on the ideological level that the real crisis is located with the assertion of cultural and ethnic rights by Travellers on the one hand and the total rejection of the implications of these demands by much of settled society.

Travellers' struggle for civil rights should be seen in the context of all the major social and political movements of the past fifty years and not as something separate or peculiar to Ireland or to Irish Travellers. Their struggles bear remarkable resemblance to those of Native Americans and indigenous peoples throughout the world.

These struggles have to be situated in a context of racism, and the strategies devised must be equal to the challenge of racism. The direct involvement of Travellers themselves in determining specific strategies and tactics is essential, both because anarchists believe that all peoples should control the decisions that effect them and because it is Travellers who have to live with the consequences of such actions. These consequences can include increased harassment and attacks.

Travellers need the active support of progressive forces such as the organised labour movement if they are to succeed in their struggle. Links need to be made with the struggles of working class people and their communities on a range of issues which effect them both. Travellers are often used by local and national politicians as a scapegoat and a distraction away from real demands about conditions in working class communities.

This cynical strategy of deflecting working class anger onto Travellers is unfortunately often successful as we have seen in Tallaght, Blanchardstown and Navan in the recent past. It needs to be challenged and exposed for what it is — playing the racist card in local politics. Traveller organisations need to take up the challenge to engage in direct action strategies if real gains are to be made.

The history of social movements such as the Black movement, the Women's movement and the Gay movement shows that serious gains will not be won by lobbying alone. The Traveller movement is no different and these lessons need to be taken on board by groups working for Travellers' rights. What is needed now is a strong Traveller-directed, direct action campaign to seriously challenge the racism at the root of all Travellers' inequalities. The WSM is committed to such a campaign and urges others committed to the basic principle of *Traveller control over the decisions made in such a campaign* to become involved in this struggle.

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