

Environmentalism: Class and Community Struggle

An Anarchist Analysis

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The economic boom in Ireland and the construction boom that has come alongside it has led to a growth in the importance of environmental campaigns. There has frequently been a large gap between the environmentalists involved in such campaigns and the left — including anarchists. Sean, one of the ‘Carrickminders’ and now a member of the WSM gives his view on what can be learnt from the recent struggles.

Capitalism in Ireland is certainly booming. The country in profit based terms has seen unprecedented growth. This growth is illustrated on the great barometer of Capitalism- GDP (Gross domestic product) which has increased each year since 1991.

With this capitalist driven development of the economy, an improved infrastructure was desperately needed. As the economy developed the state decided to upgrade the infrastructure of the country as well as facilitating construction of buildings. This meant several changes to Ireland. Roads and new housing had to be built. This could have been a chance to improve the country instead it is leading to environmental problems. Poor and often corrupt planning (as proven in the Flood/Mahon tribunals) has lead many communities to take on the state.

Environmental issues are becoming crucial issues for those seeking to change society in Ireland. We are a generation, which is witnessing the result of this abuse of the environment by the Irish State and Corporations. On a local scale we see the effects of this planning directly. Alongside the construction boom we have also witnessed a growth in waste. This has lead to a crisis of how we should deal with it (Irish Times 03/06/2005). Local communities are continually trying to stop incinerators and super dumps. The State has found its usual solution to these problems — the poor will bear the brunt.

Despite these problems and social tensions, capitalism in Ireland is pushing relentlessly forward. The infrastructure being created is showing this drive. The National Development Plan 2000–2006 (which “involves an investment of over EUR 52 billion of Public, Private and EU funds” is the state’s plan to push its development of the country forward. The plan “involves significant investment in health services, social housing, education, roads, public transport, rural development, industry, water and waste services, childcare and local development.” As part of the NDP Ireland is to get a greatly expanded road network. This is not necessarily a bad thing but from the outset there were reasons to be worried.

It seems sensible to most that the government would first finish the National Spatial Plan — which is “aiming to achieve a balanced, sustainable form of development for the future of the State” — to understand where the roads were going to be built. Included with the NSP is the requirement that “Local Authorities will designate land” for housing — and one would expect that the new roads would serve the areas designated for housing.

Not that our enlightened ones were thinking along these lines, they designed the NDP and then two years later got the report on what the roads were being built for. This may seem like being “typical Irish”, but it wasn’t. It was typical capitalism. The politicians knew for whom the roads were being built to serve, they knew where their friends businesses and lands were and that their friends in the engineering firms and construction companies were building the roads. Most importantly they didn’t care where the public was. Then, when as usual the plan ran over budget, the Minister for Transport at the time turned to his cronies in the private sector to fill the two billion euro deficit through Public — Private Partnership schemes.. They say motorways such as the M3 (see below) are built to alleviate congestion that they are so desperately needed that life as we know it can’t continue without them but yet they place it in the hands of private corporations to make a profit. This just highlighted again the public’s role in the NDP 2000–2006

— there wasn't one. That we will be fitted in around their agenda is illustrated by the way we are being crammed into housing estates around the roads rather than vice versa. The environment, in short, is fast becoming one of the battlegrounds where communities are coming into conflict with capitalism.

The last few years have seen several campaigns in Ireland revolving around the environment. Three campaigns, where to one degree or another, activists and communities overtly tried to take on the State, stand out. (In this I mean in all three cases the government placed political capital on defeating the campaign). These were the Dublin Bin Tax, the Carrickmines/m50 and the Glen of the Downs. These three are different from most others because the overt nature of their demands led to a face-off against the state. At the Glen of the Downs and Carrickmines the issue revolved around transport and sensible (or perhaps unsensible) planning whilst the bin tax was an issue that revolved around waste management and taxation.

Analysis of these three campaigns is very useful for our inevitable further involvement in environmental struggles. They took place in a similar political climate, where to one degree or another the economy was in a capitalistic sense "prospering" and Ireland had a right wing coalition government. The campaigns however were fought very differently and it is from this activists can learn.

The Dublin bin tax campaign

The bin tax saw a prominent libertarian involvement in the campaign in some Dublin communities as well as being involved in the central campaign. The class analysis in the Bin Tax (which was by no means only argued by libertarians) gave the campaign a very different edge. Traditionally, an issue such as waste management may have been raised by environmental groups in a manner not questioning the taxation issue in itself.

Waste management is a crucial issue and would have to be part of the focus of any campaign. It is not a great rallying point as it inevitably ends up in an academic arguments between specialists. The class analysis of questioning taxation rather than solely the issue of disposal was far more inclusive. The campaign had many genuinely local groups across Dublin and seriously challenged the state by fighting implementation of the tax through mass non-payment and blockades of waste depots. The campaign ultimately seems to have lost momentum but crucially it could have won. In an interesting comparison to the Bin tax, another environmental campaign, reached its critical point simultaneously this was Carrickmines/M50

Carrickmines/M50 Motorway

This was a campaign that proposed rerouting the final leg of the M50 ring road around Dublin. The opposition was based on the discovery of the ruins of a medieval castle, which would be destroyed by the motorway. The campaign revolved around an occupation of the medieval castle site and later around several legal challenges. It challenged the right of the state to build a road on the ruins of a medieval castle. Little attention was paid to the impact of the road on the people and local community where clear class discrimination in the soundproofing of the motorways was obvious. Huge banks of earth protected rich areas whereas only thin cinderblock walls protected working class areas from the noise.

The castle occupation fell in numbers as it failed to attract widespread interest. This allowed infighting and personality politics to destroy the campaign. The campaign also over-concentrated on the legal challenges whilst failing to engage people. Although we often talked about leafleting the local area – this was never done. The over-concentration on the legal case meant a further alienation of those who were not of a legal mind or willing to be litigants. The dangers of such an approach is obvious and activists learned the hard way when they won a legal challenge and the government subsequently changed the law to suit their ends.

The Glen of the Downs

The Glen of the Downs was a campaign which opposed the widening of the N11 motorway in Wicklow. This widening was having a detrimental impact on a nature reserve. Activists occupied the site in 1997 and began what became a three-year battle. The campaign again fought the authorities through court action. Their focus was largely based on an ecological analysis and in many ways it was influenced by “deep ecology”. The campaign at times engaged the population but mainly as a media driven spectacle. The campaign, after three years, was isolated enough for the state to move and forcibly remove protestors.

Both Carrickmines and the Glen of the Downs reached varying degrees of success but ultimately failed. The Carrickmines campaign almost collapsed internally due to effect the personality politics could have on a small group of people. The campaign relied on the support of history and archaeological enthusiasts and gave the local community little material interest in the campaign.

The Glen of the Downs was far more successful but when the major cull of trees happened the campaign had failed to interest enough people to the point of direct action. The activists courageously did face down the forces of the state to the point that 13 people went to prison – some only being released after two months and a hunger strike. However, largely alienated from society at large, similarly to Carrickmines they lost. The N11 is completed (problematically as activists predicted). The M50 at Carrickmines is about to be opened shortly.

These campaign also raised issues which are very much expert based. The Carrickmines campaign in particular was debated in very technical language between academics and engineers, thereby isolating itself from a majority of the population. This obviously alienated people as they felt they could not aid in any practical way.

Though the Dublin Bin Tax campaign has effectively collapsed it was a very different campaign, with some local communities having direct participation. This was because the issues were presented to people in the context that they had a direct material interest in the campaign winning. The argument was simple and presented in common language; you didn't need to be an expert in commerce to participate.

The Future

Libertarian activists can no longer approach the issue of the environment as something we lament as an unfortunate victim of capitalism. The destruction of the environment is intrinsically linked to the development of capitalism and the oppression of the poor. This destruction is also having huge ramifications on local communities.

Environmental campaigns, which present the issue of the environment as something removed from communities, can no longer suffice. A strategy such as that applied during the Bin Tax is necessary. We must question the social consequences of environmental destruction. The approach of many campaigns, regardless of intention, where single issues, such as archaeology, are put forward as primary are too similar to the government's agenda. They sideline local people in favour of individuals personal interests.

The Bin Tax illustrated the power of a social analysis on environmental struggles. It gave more people an interest in the issue. This is not to say that issues such as waste management or nature should be sidelined. These issues are complementary to a social analysis but the most important issue is the impact on the lives of ordinary people, as issue too often sidelined by campaigns.

The success of this strategy is now being seen at the Corrib Gas Campaign. In Mayo, Shell is trying to build a potentially highly dangerous pipeline. The local campaign with the support of activists from elsewhere has concentrated on the issue of safety and then brought other issues into the struggle such as water pollution, death of wildlife and visible beauty. This campaign, which has seen five local people imprisoned, has by no means won but it has currently forced Shell to withdraw for several months. The campaign as a local lead campaign has raised local safety issues unlike the campaigns which concentrate on archaeology history or nature.

A crucial issue to raise is why environmental campaigns which focus on individual interests are like this. They are often criticised from the sidelines because they do not incorporate class politics. However, if archaeologists initiate the campaign it will inevitably be based around an archaeological analysis. We should not disregard their campaign but rather work in tandem with them where possible.

This said, it is also important that in certain cases we must realise our differences, for example, I think it's impossible for class struggle libertarian communists to work with primitivists on issues like road or development because our points of view are so far apart. Our working together will only heighten tension and weaken campaigns.

Activists in Ireland still lack involvement in what are seen as more directly environmental issues, such as road projects. There is certainly a trend within anarchism influenced by 'deep ecology' that opposes all roads and development. We do not oppose all road development but we should certainly take issue with many of the current proposals where profit is all and community is nothing. Instead we should support sustainable development such as the plans suggested for the M1, M2 and M3 to be replaced by a single motorway with link roads to the major towns. These also incorporated reopening a disused railway that runs almost exactly down the route of these motorways.

The case of the M3 illustrates classically how our analysis could succeed. The M3 is a motorway to nowhere, serving little purpose and will partially destroy one of Ireland's and indeed north-western Europe's most important prehistoric sites — Tara. The motorway is supposedly being built to alleviate traffic for commuters to Dublin from the major towns on the route — Dunshaughlin, Clonee, Kells. The support for the motorway in some of the local towns is naturally quite high. People in the area have been told continuously that this road will solve all the congestion problems. The motorway will however only feed the commuters to a huge traffic jam where this motorway will meet the ring motorway around Dublin, the M50.

At the moment the campaign is being fought over the historically and archaeologically rich valley of Tara- Skryne. That the campaign against the current route has focused on the archaeological significance of the sites to be destroyed in many ways shows equal disregard for the

people of Kells, Dunshaughlin and Clonee (the towns most effected by the traffic congestion). It's only when the campaign spokespeople are accused of holding up progress that they challenge the need and practicality of the motorway.

This approach along with an over-concentration on legal cases alienates the most crucial people whose support is needed to win these cases – the local communities.

The arguments being made by the campaign are largely academic and risk alienating those without the time and money to buy and read archaeology texts. The government are prepared to change the law, as illustrated at Carrickmines, should they lose any legal challenges.

There is a danger that once the campaign reaches that stage it will have alienated a majority of the local support needed to mount a serious challenge to the motorway. This campaign may well lose in a similar fashion to the way Carrickmines and the Glen of the Downs lost where a relatively small group of activists try to face down the State and the courts through direct action.

However if the campaign were to follow the example of the Mayo pipeline campaign and concentrate on local people rather than the special interest of a minority (which, although I hate to admit it, archaeology is) the campaign could succeed.

Many people of Dunshaughlin and Clonee are now turning to the only people who are claiming to have their interests at heart – the National Roads Authority (N.R.A.) and the government. They have not been told the reality of the motorway, which is that it is really only a faster way to get people to a super traffic-jam.

Undoubtedly there are going to be more environmental struggles in Ireland in the next few years. The approach to the Bin Tax was very positive in many respects. People are perhaps in a strong position to fight issues like the attempt to implement a water tax in Dublin. We have seen mistakes but more importantly we have also seen a working example of how people taking real direct action can really threaten the power of the State.

They have been parts of a working model of how communities can take on the power of the state. Crucially these are past examples of how we can engage the issues around environmentalism. Activists must, however, broaden our horizons and tackle issues like the National Development Plan, whilst working with special interest campaigns where possible.

This article is not an attempt to be a pejorative statement from a class struggle point of view; there is a lot to be learnt on our part from these campaigns. Primarily the heritage based activists who took on the authorities at Carrickmines and the ecologists at the Glen of the Downs were doing something we failed at – taking on the issue of the environment. The campaign at Carrickmines, which I was directly involved in, felt resentment at the time due to the lack of participation and even interest from organised political left-wing groups.

Individuals at the Glen of the Downs felt a similar resentment at the fact that left-wing political parties used them at the time when the campaign became high profile. Without help from other groups they concentrated on what they knew best – at Carrickmines it was archaeology. In this they were undoubtedly right – they fought the campaign on their ground. The point I am making is that archaeologists will do what they do best, as will ecologists. If class struggle activists feel we have a better approach and analysis then we must act on it.

The issues of the environment should not be dismissed, but the preservation of trees or heritage is unlikely to be the main priority of people who spend up to four hours getting to and from work. But both sets of issues are crucial to us and should not be mutually exclusive with sustainable development.

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