

A City in Common

The Radical Potential of Ireland's Eco-Transport Struggles

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Could climate change become a catalysing force for radical social transformation in Ireland? Recent struggles around public transport in Ireland prompt us to think along these lines.

During the spring of 2016, Luas workers went on strike for decent pay and for terms and conditions similar to workers in other public transport services¹. Similarly, in Autumn 2015, Irish Rail workers went on strike, primarily in opposition to the EU Commission and the Irish government's gradual moves towards privatisation².

Previously, in Spring 2015, Dublin Bus and Bus Éireann workers went on strike over plans by the National Transport Authority to tender out 10% of public routes to private operators. SIPTU's banner at Liberty Hall outlined why: 'Say No to Privatisation; privatisation results in fare increase, reduced services, a threat to free travel, a bad deal for taxpayers and job cuts'.

SIPTU and NBRU members and strike organisers have emphasised the damage privatisation will do to society, primarily concentrating on the loss of community services and the race to the bottom in bus drivers' terms and conditions³. The striking workers deserve our support and their claims should be taken seriously.

This is definitely the case when the regime media adhere to a deeply unimaginative line, loudly declaiming traffic disruption to an imagined city of angry consumers and silently accepting the hollowing out of public services⁴.

At the same time, however, we also need to think about what's not being said, about the words that don't make it on to the papers or the banner.

The missing planet

In these recent clashes between the defenders of public services and the agents of privatisation, an articulated concern for the planet's capacity to sustain life is strangely missing.

This is, perhaps, unsurprising. In Ireland, as elsewhere, the crisis of 2007 and ensuing recession have provided governments of both left- and right-wing hues with a pretext to accelerate fossil fuel extraction in pursuit of 'growth'.

Fighting austerity, it seems, has swept discussions of climate change to the margins of electoral and movement-based politics. All the while, capitalism's 'grow or die' imperative continues to take a toll on a finite planet. The same week as the Dublin bus strike, scientists observed record carbon dioxide (CO₂) concentrations in the atmosphere.

¹ The Luas workers' claims were more than justified. Over the previous six years Luas increased passenger numbers by 5 million and revenues by 30%, with Transdev paying a dividend to its parent company of 2.8million in 2013/14. Source: Busworkers Action Group. See Brian Fagan, 2016, LUAS workers 'spitting on the constitution says right wing nut'; available www.wsm.ie/c/luas-workers-spitting-constitution-says-right-wing-nut

² Tom Murray, 2015, We defend Public Transport! (Of Irish Rail and EU Privatisation) Available <http://www.wsm.ie/c/defend-publictransport-irish-rail-eu-privatisation>

³ See Scott Millar, 'Save Our Bus Service' in Liberty, April, 2015. Available at www.siptu.ie/media/media_19045_en.pdf

⁴ Number of Irish newspaper Nexis results with words 'strikes' and 'chaos' in headline: 288. Number of Irish newspaper Nexis results with words 'privatisation' and 'public transport' in headline: 3. Via Richard McAleavey, Facebook, 1st May. See hiredknives.wordpress.com/; see also Tom Murray, 'Luas Strikes: Rage Against the Regime Media', February, 2015. Available <http://www.wsm.ie/c/luas-strike-regime-media-bias>

This 400ppm (parts per million) record is a milestone for global warming and comes nearly three decades after what is considered the ‘safe’ level of 350ppm was passed⁵. Public transport clearly plays a crucial role here: each full standard bus can take more than 50 cars off the road while a full train can eliminate over 600⁶. In these circumstances, failing to link public transport with environmental sustainability is not just strange oversight but suicidal blindness.

Part of not seeing the problem involves seeing phantom solutions. As Prole.info puts it, whenever the need for a real critique of the capitalist system is strongly felt, distorted, self-defeating, pseudocritiques multiply⁷.

“an estimated 380,000 people living in rural areas do not have access to the transport services they require”

The climate crisis will not be resolved in such a way as to sustain a life-supporting ecosystem by corporate philanthropy, by miraculous scientific fixes or by individuals greening their consumption habits or lifestyles. Similarly, the profit margins that might attract private capital into green production or sustainable transport are not there⁸.

A good example of this occurred in March 2014 when air pollution in French cities reached dangerously high levels. Officials in Paris decided to discourage car use by making public transit free for three days.

Private transport operators would strenuously resist such measures, and yet these are precisely the kinds of actions that need to occur to battle increasing levels of atmospheric carbon. “Rather than allowing bus fares to rise while service erodes, we need to be lowering prices and expanding services – regardless of the costs”⁹.

While there may be debate and discussion about the best way to respond to climate change, there is absolutely no scenario in which we can avoid large-scale social transformation while sustaining decent human survival. Wartime mobilisations provide the closest historical precedent for reducing carbon emissions on the scale that climate scientists indicate is necessary.

During World War Two, for example, as pleasure driving was virtually eliminated to conserve fuel, the use of public transport increased by 87 per cent in the US and by 95 per cent in Canada¹⁰.

Today, it is no mystery where the vast work of ecological transition needs to take place. Much of it needs to happen in ambitious emission-reducing projects – smart grids, light rail and public transport systems, citywide composting systems, building retrofits, and urban redesigns to keep us from spending half our lives in traffic jams¹¹.

These changes need to be fair, so that those people already struggling to make ends meet are not asked to make additional sacrifices to offset the consumption and carbon emissions of the rich¹².

⁵ Adam Vaughan (6.05.2015) ‘Global carbon dioxide levels break 400ppm milestone’ in The Guardian. See <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/may/06/globalcarbon-dioxide-levels-break400ppm-milestone>

⁶ Department of Transport and Main Roads, Queensland, AU. ‘Benefits of Public Transport’. Available at translink.com.au/about-translink/what-we-do/benefits-of-public-transport

⁷ Prole.info, 2012, *The Housing Monster*. PM Press.

⁸ Naomi Klein, 2014. *This Changes Everything: Capitalism versus the Climate*. London: Penguin.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

Climate change really does provide us with compelling reasons not just for the defence of public transport services but for their radical re-imagination, reconstruction and expansion. So why isn't this happening?

From the climate horrors to mass direct action

The problem at the present historical conjuncture, in Ireland as elsewhere, is that we have ceded our capacity to shape our social ties to capital, to an aggressive, for-profit logic that runs directly counter to the sustainability of the planet's ecosystems and to humanity's survival as a species¹³.

In Ireland, rampant capitalist development has ensured we have much work to do to arrive at even decent emission-reduction projects. In a recent Environmental Protection Agency report, 100% of respondents to a survey of local authorities felt that local public transport services were inadequate in their local areas; an estimated 380,000 people living in rural areas do not have access to the transport services they require¹⁴.

While starving public transport of resources, boom-time governments encouraged private car ownership and usage. Between 2001 and 2009, instead of improving national and regional roads, the motorway system grew by 430% in Ireland.

There are now 2.5 times more kilometers of motorway per person in Ireland than in Britain¹⁵. Meanwhile, the good people at Transport for Ireland encourage walking as the most environmentally friendly form of transport. ('Walking can support local shops and businesses, as pedestrians have the freedom to 'pop-in' to pick up goods¹⁶). Clearly, we have a lot of work to do. What form might that work take?

Starting from the current struggles, full support for the Luas, bus and train workers is in all our interests. If workers and unions wanted to circumvent hostile media and win over public opinion, they could refuse to collect fares¹⁷. We don't need privatisation — we do need a free public transport service, operated for passengers and run by the people with the best knowledge, the transport workers themselves. All of us have a role to play.

In Stockholm and Gothenburg, commuters are taking the initiative in the fight for decent, free public transportation financed from progressive taxation. The "Planka" encourages people to 'free ride' on public transport. If you become a member with a monthly subscription, the group will then pay your fines if you get caught. Planka free-riding becomes a clever way to save money and, at the same time, is a political act for free public transport¹⁸.

¹³ See Murray Bookchin, 2005, *The Ecology of Freedom*. AK Press.

¹⁴ EPA, 2011, 'Barriers to Sustainable: Transport in Ireland. Available at www.epa.ie/pubs/reports/research/climate/CCRP%20Report%20Series%20No.%207%20-%20Barriers%20to%20Sustainable%20Transport%20in%20Ireland.pdf

¹⁵ Robert Emmet Hernan, 2011, *Transport Policy in Ireland: Real and Imagined*. Available at: <http://www.irishenvironment.com/reports/transport-policy-in-ireland/>

¹⁶ Transport for Ireland is the "single public transport brand" which the National Transport Authority has developed to promote and integrate public transport provision in Ireland. "Good for the Environment and the Economy". See www.transportforireland.ie

¹⁷ NBRU and SIPTU workers refused to collect fares when on strike in July, 2003. See *Workers Solidarity*, No. 76 published in August 2003.

¹⁸ See planka.nu/

In the past, worker direct management of Barcelona's transport system during the revolution in Spain in the 1930s illustrates the ability and ingenuity of working people to directly manage the industries where they work.

Today, achieving a large-scale, green transition will necessitate combining direct actions against environmental destruction and mass mobilisations to pressure states into adopting green policies while supporting the popular creation and expansion of local, co-operative economies in food and energy¹⁹²⁰.

In Ireland, similarly, we need to trace the green links from community opposition to extractive projects in Mayo, Leitrim and Fermanagh through struggles over inhabiting city centres to the development of comprehensive programmes that make low-carbon lives possible for everyone.

Today's striking transport workers are not just defending their livelihoods they are also fighting for environmentally sustainable cities. An injury to one really is an injury to all.

¹⁹ Naomi Klein, 2014. *This Changes Everything: Capitalism versus the Climate*. London: Penguin.

²⁰ See Murray Bookchin, 2005, *The Ecology of Freedom*. AK Press.

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