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AFTER PARTNERSHIP:

WHICH WAY FOR THE UNIONS?

The aging intellectual leader of the Irish labour movement, David Begg, began a SWOT analysis as he surveyed the wreckage left behind after ICTU-Government talks on pay cuts. The Strengths, Weakness, Opportunities, Threats framework is a fashionable tool in business and bureaucratic circles and so Begg drew up a 'discussion paper' that had all the appearance of gravitas while lacking in futures strategy. Under the category, Opportunities, Begg claimed there was now 'An opportunity to re-connect with our own members free of guilt by association with any aspect of Government policy.'¹ To put that same point somewhat more negatively, Begg acknowledged that the union leadership had become disconnected from its membership because they had become embroiled with successive right wing governments. It was an extraordinary, but accurate admission.

The trade union movement is the largest civil society organisation in the country, with 840,000 members on both sides of the border. By contrast, the Irish Farmers Association has 40,000 members while business organisation such as IBEC or ISME have only a few thousand between them. Despite its size and social weight, the unions are treated in an unequal way by official society. The state radio service, RTE, for example, has a 'Business slot' during its morning news bulletin where capitalists and managers are allowed to promote their view of their world without the slightest critical questioning. Yet no such facility is afforded even the most moderate figure in the Irish trade unions.

Marx and Trade Unions

Socialists start from a position of explicit sympathy and support for the union movement. This distinctive position marks us off from other anti-capitalist strands. In the *Poverty of Philosophy*, Marx took issue with Proudhon, one the founders of anarchism who dismissed trade unions on two specific grounds. First, Proudhon argued that, as 'each worker individually should dispose freely over his person and his hands'; unions were an infringement on his liberty. Second, the union struggles were futile because, given a limited wages fund, unions could not make permanent gains. Against these arguments, Marx wrote,

The first attempts of workers *to associate* among themselves always takes place in the form of combinations. Large scale industry concentrates in one place a crowd of people unknown to one another. Competition divides their interests. But the maintenance of wages, this common interest which they have against their boss, united them in a common thought of resistance – combination. This

¹ 'Congress starts internal analysis of partnership, role of unions', *Industrial Relations News*, 20 January 2010.

combination always has a double aim, that of stopping competition among workers, so that they carry on the general competition with the capitalist. If the first object for resistance has been to merely maintain wages, the maintenance of the association become more important and necessary for them than the maintenance of wages.²

Writing later for the *New York Daily Tribune*, Marx was even more explicit about the importance of unions for the spirit of the working class. Noting that philanthropists and some socialists considered strikes harmful for workers, he stated that

I am on the contrary, convinced that the alternative rise and fall of wages, and the continued conflicts between masters and men resulting there from, are, in the present organisation of industry, the indispensable means of holding up the spirit of the labouring classes, of combining them into one great association against the encroachments of the ruling class, and of preventing them from becoming apathetic, thoughtless, more or less well fed instruments of production.³

Marx defended trade unions on two grounds. He challenged theories about an 'iron law of wages' which, whether advanced from the left by figures such as Lassalle, or from the right, by economists such as Ricardo, who argued that unions could not upset the laws of supply and demand to win increases wages. Against the supposed power of 'market forces', Marx defended the human capacity to organise and, at times, win victories. But acknowledging that workers could also at times face defeats, Marx still defended the unions for the role they played in the spiritual and moral growth of the workers movement. Without unions, workers were divided and atomised by the competitive pressure of the market.

Irish Trade Union Movement

If we start our analysis of the modern Irish trade union movement from this standpoint, it becomes clear that it has entered a period of crisis. The outcome of this crisis is still an open question – it may lead either to a significant decline in membership or the re-emergence of the unions as a serious fighting force. But whatever the outcome, there can be little doubt about the crisis affecting workers organisation.

The reasons are not hard to find. In 2009, there were two enormous mobilisations of Irish workers; on February 21st over 100,000 people marched against the pension levy and the government's economic policy. Grassroots' pressure subsequently led to a call for a national strike on March 30th. But far from pursuing this mobilisation with any vigour, the ICTU saw it only as a bargaining lever to get back into social partnership. They, therefore, took up an invitation to enter talks with the government and were then kept talking for months in order to dissipate the threat of a national strike.

Later that same year, in direct defiance of the old adage – 'fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me' – the same union leaders fell for the exact same government trick.

² K. Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1995), 188.

³ K. Lapidus, *Marx and Engels on the Trade Unions* (New York: International Publishers, 1987), 43.

On November 24th, over a quarter of a million public sector workers took strike action and a new dynamism appeared to be returning to the unions. RTE engaged in open, crude propaganda war claiming, without a shred of evidence, that many public sector strikes were not serious because they went shopping in Newry. Instead of escalating the action to show even more seriousness, the union leaders responded to another government invitation to talk. This time they came like chastened servants offering gifts to a bankers' government. Under the cryptic slogan, 'More for less' they accepted that nearly 20,000 jobs could be slashed from the public sector and that the remaining workers could cover for them by showing greater flexibility. In a shocking set of documents, they offered as 'give-aways' many hard won gains workers had achieved – such as the right overtime payments for unsocial hours – in a desperate hope that the government would accept them back as social partners. To their amazement, they were met only with curt dismissal and a contemptuous kick out the door.

These fiascos have led to a wave of despondency throughout the union membership. This feeling is not simply the result of defeat, although the scale of the pay cuts and the sheer incompetence of the union leadership were shocking. Their failure to mount an effective challenge to a weak government which was devoid of popular support and which had even lost the active support of the Gardai and the army was truly shocking. If they had shown any willingness to fight and had even scored a draw or forced some reduction in the state offensive, they could have held their heads high. But, to give up without a fight and then to be dismissed contemptuously has raised different types of questions for workers: Namely, how can workers combine and have a leadership that really stands up for our interests? How can we be represented by leaders who are not in the pockets of the state, or so seduced by the flattery of power that they do nothing? Even if we fight today, how can we be sure we will not again be sold out tomorrow?

The trigger for this type of questioning has not just been the experience of defeat in 2009 but the growing revelations about the lifestyles of the union leaders. The fact that most of the top union leaders expect a wage of €130,000 plus as a right has come as a shock for many workers. The terrible record of leaders like Peter McLoone and the former SIPTU leader, Des Geraghty, on the board of FAS has led many to believe that there is cosy cartel linking their organisation to the political elite. The defeats plus these revelations has led to a new questioning which goes to the heart of the nature of workers' organisation: how to organise resistance under capitalism without having your leaders co-opted by it.

The discontent among the grassroots has forced the union leaders into a path of active resistance to the governments' plans. In January 2010, they announced a campaign strategy to oppose the pay cuts. This consisted of an extensive non-cooperation campaign which was escalated in different stages; a strategy of selective industrial action in strategic areas and 'consideration' of further national stoppages at a later point. The ICTU leadership remain terrified of French style national strikes and mobilisations, which attempt to drive the government from office – but equally they realise that they must do something to avert a crisis becoming a catastrophe. The emphasis, therefore, is on controlled action rather than unleashing the pent up anger of workers.

Despite these limitations, activists should fully support the resistance. Simply denouncing an inept and cowardly leadership from the sidelines will achieve little. It may even marginally add to the demoralisation in particular instances. The key task is to restore the confidence and fighting spirit of workers, to engage in ‘damage reversal’ as one activist put it. This means promoting the policy of non-co-operation through a renewal of workplace organisation via the recruitment of new activists who can replace the dead weight of older hacks. But while openly embracing even a weak form of resistance, we need to tell the truth about what is required for recovery. Namely, that the strikes in strategic industries must go ahead in defiance of any government attempt to bring in legislation to deny these workers of their right to strike. And that these strikes must be accompanied by punctuated and escalating national days of actions that bring tens of thousands on to the streets in a display of popular anger.

While engaging in these immediate tactical arguments, there is also a need to return to the wider questions that have been thrown up by last years’ experience: how to develop fighting workers organisations in a capitalist society. Answering this question means coming to terms both with the legacy of social partnership, the more recent strategies for moving beyond it, and the wider effects of bureaucratisation on the labour movement.

SOCIAL PARTNERSHIP: A BALANCE SHEET

The Irish model of social partnership was once hailed as a success story for the global trade union movement. The consensus was that Irish unions had avoided the marginalisation that befell the British movement after the defeat of the miners strike in 1984. They did so by apparently devising a strategy to balance a requirement for national competitiveness with that of social justice equity. As an added bonus the Irish unions were able to compensate for the weakness of the Labour party by gaining a political voice within the corridors of power. This, it was claimed, lessened the worst effects of neo-liberalism. One of the advocates of the partnership model, Paul Sweeney, even suggested that partnership bought about a fundamental change in the relationship between workers and employers. He claims that ‘for unions and employers the biggest accomplishment has been getting into the heads of each other, to understand unambiguously what the deep concerns of the other side are’.⁴

All the evidence, however, suggests that this was simply delusional. Far from workers getting into the heads of employers, it was the bosses who got into the heads of the union leaders, mainly through flattery and deception. Statistics on the distribution of wealth, for example, do not indicate that Irish workers benefited more than their counterparts elsewhere. Living standards certainly improved as a result of a long Celtic Tiger boom but the share of the economy distributed to wages declined. Table 1 presents data on the adjusted wage share of the total economy and indicates that the share distributed to wages declined faster in Ireland than in the original European Union fifteen. More interestingly, the decline occurred as the number of employees increased dramatically. The figures indicate a significant shift in class power within Ireland in this period.

Table 1: Adjusted Wage Share of total economy – Compensation per employees as percentage of GDP at factor cost per person employed.

⁴ P. Sweeney, *Ireland’s Economic Success: Reasons and Lessons* (Dublin, New Island, 2008), 125.

	EU-15	Ireland
1960-1970		77.9
1971- 1980	74.5	75.9
1980-1990	71.8	71.2
1991-2000	68.7	62.3
2001-2007	67.3	54.0

Source: European Commission Statistical Annex of European Economy Table 32

Nor can it be claimed that that the political exchange which was at the heart of social partnership minimised neoliberalism and led to greater social protection. Despite the Celtic Tiger boom, Ireland had the lowest level of spending on social protection in the EU fifteen. Means testing rather than universal social insurance was more prevalent, with 29 percent of total expenditure on benefits being means tested as against an EU average of 10 percent.⁵ Ireland also had one of the lowest levels of spending on pensions, at only 3.7 percent of GDP as against, at the other extreme, 14.7 percent in Italy.⁶ One result is that even in the boom years, Irish workers had longer working lives, with the average exit age at 64.4 as against an average of 61.0 across the EU.⁷ In the private sector, pension coverage is abysmal with only 38 percent of employees being covered for pensions.⁸

Table 2: Total Expenditure on Social Protection in % of GDP at current prices

	1991	1994	1997	2000	2002
EU-15	26.1	28.0	27.8	27.2	27.9
Ireland	19.6	19.7	16.6	14.3	16.0

Source: Europe in Figures, Eurostat Year book 2005

Social partnership also coincided with a dramatic decline in union density and involvement by members. Absolute numbers of trade union members increased during the boom years but at a much slower rate than the expansion in jobs. In the decade between 1994, which is conventionally taken as the start of the Celtic Tiger, and 2004 total employment grew from 1,221,000 to 1,836,000. But the figures for union membership showed a much slower growth.

Table 3: Trends in Trade Union Density in Ireland 1975-2004

⁵ European Commission 2001, 21.

⁶ Eurostat, 2005, 38.

⁷ European Commission 2005, 59.

⁸ Pensions Board, 2005, 38.

Year	Membership	Employment Density
1975	449,520	60 %
1985	485,050	61%
1995	504450	53 %
2004	534,300	36%
2007	551,700	32%

Source: Roche and Ashmore 2001 and CSO 2008a

These bald figures, however, hide an even more spectacular decline in key areas. Dublin, for example, once had one of the highest concentrations of union members but today it has one of the lowest regional densities, only the West and Mid-West have lower. Density is also declining even faster among younger people rather than older people. Only 15 percent of the age category 20-24 are union members and 26 percent of the age groups 25-34 are unionised.

More surprisingly, union density fell faster among manual workers than among white-collar employees. Today 45 percent of professionals are union members but only 28 percent of craft workers and 36 percent of plant and machine operatives are. The long boom, which swept along the economy after 2001 until its eventual crash in 2008, was sustained by the housing market. However, union density in the traditionally strong area of construction declined to just 23 percent of the workforce. In hotels and restaurants, union density has slumped to a mere 8 percent.⁹

During the boom years, the Irish workforce underwent an extremely rapid transformation with the influx of migrant workers. Non-Irish workers came to account for 16 percent of the overall labour force and in particular sectors such as hotels and other production industries represented 38 percent and 19 percent respectively.¹⁰ Yet union recruitment among migrant workers remained lower than among Irish workers. 35 percent of Irish workers are members of unions but only 13 percent of non-Irish nationals are.¹¹ The failure to recruit migrant workers became a major cause of union decline in sectors such hotel and catering.

These trends produced an important dichotomy which has subsequently exposed a huge weakness in the movement: trade unionism is now highly concentrated in the public sector. In the private sector – and in the multinational sector in particular – trade unionism is in decline. In 2005, it was estimated that union density in the overall private sector was 20 percent and only 11 percent in the multinationals. It remained, however, at over 85 percent in the public sector.

This shift was a direct result of the passivity brought about by partnership and an employer strategy to reduce union influence. Ironically, while the employers' organisation, Irish Business Employers Confederation, was claiming to be a partner with the ICTU, its members were simultaneously undermining a union presence at workplace level. Employers in the multinational sector began a union reduction strategy in the late eighties, just after social

⁹ CSO 2008a, 7.

¹⁰ CSO, 2008b Annex 1 and 2.

¹¹ CSO 2008a, 5.

partnership had begun. A University of Limerick study of 42 incoming multi-nationals arriving onto greenfield sites between 1987 and 1991 found that just 16 agreed to recognise unions.¹²

However, the pattern accelerated in later years. The *Industrial Relations News* magazine contacted 45 Industrial Development Authority supported companies who had announced more than 100 jobs between 2001 and 2004. Just one of the 17 new multinational companies setting up recognised a union while existing companies, that were expanding jobs, were also keeping unions out. In some instances, they operated what was known as a 'double breasted policy' where they continued to deal with unions in long established plants but refused to concede union recognition in more recent plants. An interesting study of the phenomenon concluded that this strategy was influenced by management's expectation that they would encounter little union opposition.¹³

Unfortunately, this expectation proved correct. Having defined themselves as serving the needs of the 'national economy', union leaders failed to press the issue of recognition on the multinationals. Attacks on companies such as Intel or Hewlett Packard were regarded as dangerous because they might 'frighten away foreign investment'. To justify their own passivity, the ICTU leaders began to distinguish between 'non-union' workplaces and 'anti-union' workplaces. In the former, workers were served with 'good' Human Resources departments whereas in the latter cases such as Ryanair, they were denied all rights.

Before 2001, unions could refer a recognition dispute to the Labour Court for adjudication if they agreed to be bound in advance by the decision. In the period 1985 to 1991, the Labour Court issued 67 recommendations relating to trade union recognition of which 88 percent were in the unions' favour. Recognition, however, was given in only 16 firms - or in 27 percent of the cases. Yet despite the failure of Labour Court rulings to compel employers to recognise unions, there was no pronounced upward trend in the strikes for union recognition in the 1980s and 1990s.

Determination by companies to resist union recognition was accompanied by a Human Resources management strategy to individualise employment relationships and to promote performance appraisal based pay structures.¹⁴ Other mechanisms to corrode collectivist responses included sophisticated techniques to filter recruits; a stronger emphasis on individual development and up-skilling; improved and targeted management communications and various forms of stakeholder consultation. The combination of an active managerial policy to marginalise unions in the private sector and the failure of union leaders to respond led to the dramatic decline in union density.

¹² P. Gunnigle, D. Collings, & M. Morley, "Accommodating Global Capitalism? State policy and industrial relations in American MNCs in Ireland" in A. Ferner, J. Quintanilla and C. Sanchez-Runde, *Multinationals, Institutions and the Construction of Transnational Practices: Convergence and Diversity in the Global Economy*, London, Palgrave, 2006)

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Turner, T., D'Art, D. & Gunnigle, P. "Multinational Corporations: A Challenge to European Trade Unions", Irish Journal of Management, 2002.

One dispute dramatised the battle over union recognition in the private sector. On March 7th 1998, clerical workers, loaders, mechanics, catering staff and even the airport police walked out of Dublin Airport in solidarity with 39 baggage handlers in Ryanair who had gone on strike for union recognition. The baggage handlers had taken part in short stoppages for nine weeks after their company refused to negotiate on pay, working conditions and safety matters. Instead of backing the escalation, however, the leaders of Services Industrial Professional Technical Union called the action off by agreeing to an inquiry into the dispute, chaired a former union leader and former employer leader.

This was the background in which a 'High level group' consisting of government, union and employer representatives was established under the aegis of Partnership 2000. The group recommended a statutory mechanism for dealing with disputes where there was no system of collective bargaining. It explicitly ruled out any form of mandatory union recognition because this would erode Ireland's voluntarist system of industrial relations. Instead unions were to be given the right to refer claims for improvements in pay, conditions or procedures to the Labour Court who would decide in the first instance if the referral was valid. In the event that it was, the Labour Court could make a legally binding recommendation. However, it could not force any company to engage in collective bargaining with a union. Many of these proposals were eventually embodied in Industrial Relations (Amendment) Act 2001.

This limited form of union rights gave the unions considerably less than that which was offered to British workers by the Blair government. Under the British procedure, a Central Arbitration Committee could issue a declaration that a union could be recognised for bargaining if a majority of employees in a particular union wanted that. Irish union leaders failed to press for mandatory union recognition because they were convinced that the good working relationship they had with state agencies would deliver a form of limited recognition in the private sector. Yet in an early sign of their dismissal, the Supreme Court undermined the limited provisions on union recognition and when the union leaders appealed to the state for assistance, they were met with a deaf ear. Even on the most basic indices of conserving union organisation and union density, partnership was an abject failure.

THE ORGANISING MODEL

Towards the end of social partnership era, some union leaders began to understand that problems were developing. In 1997, a little known factory worker and SWP member Carol Ann Duggan took 42 percent of the vote in a bid to become SIPTU President. Although she was defeated, it was a strong indication that considerable disquiet existed at the base of the union. Much of that anger was directed at an old guard who had maintained a warm relationship with Fianna Fail and had grown even closer during the years of social partnership. A new moderate left emerged around Des Geraghty and Jack O Connor to take over the leadership. Both developed a rhetoric, which denounced neo-liberalism and inequality in Irish society while remaining ardent advocates of social partnership.

The ascent of a new leadership in SIPTU coincided with a debate in the international trade union movement on the differences between a 'servicing' model and an 'organising'

model.¹⁵ The former relied on the actions of union officials outside to deliver services to individual members, often on a rights based agenda supported by legal mechanisms. The latter emphasised the need for membership involvement and a re-focus on collective action. The new SIPTU leadership became the main advocates of a shift to an organising model. Soon most of the other unions took up a similar rhetoric.

There were a number of reasons why the union leaders had begun to make some shift – even before the partnership model had collapsed. First, even they could see the ethos of ‘business unionism’ that had accompanied social partnership fed into a particularly negative version of a ‘servicing model’. As negotiation on wages and many conditions of work took place at a national level, the main focus of workplace trade unionism became ‘casework’. Typically union representatives took up the individual cases and then referred them on to the professional full-time negotiator who processed them through the Labour Relations Commission or Labour Court. This servicing model led to a major decline in membership participation. SIPTU, for example, is organised into branches that average between 2,000 and 3,000 members. These in turn group together workplaces sections that are represented by Section Committees. The decline in union participation was most dramatically illustrated in the erosion of the branch structure. Attendances at many annual general meetings of the branches declined to a tiny handful and often retired members came to play a more prominent role. Sections rarely held workplace meetings and so ‘the union’ often became a small number of core activists who formed the section committee.

Second, while the employers’ organisation, IBEC, officially supported social partnership during the boom years, SIPTU’s Jack O’Connor, in particular, understood that this might not remain the case forever. Alongside a number of other union strategists, he began to study the Australian experience where a close alliance existed between the Australian Council of Unions and the Federal Labour government from 1983 to 1996. Initially, this gave Australian unions an influence on economic and social policymaking. But the very passivity which the ‘accord’ arrangements induced also led to their decline, with trade union membership falling by over 1 percent a year in this period. Then, in 1996, the Labour government was swept out of office and replaced by an anti-union conservative government led by John Howard. The political victory of the right encouraged employers to adopt a ‘union substitution’ strategy that aimed to marginalise or remove a union presence. Thereafter Australian unions faced major problems and were forced to embark on a revitalisation strategy.

O Connor and the other union leaders concluded that to sustain social partnership into the future they needed to show a little more muscle and by so doing to increase their membership. In other words, even before the partnership process had collapsed, they had begun to embrace the dual strategy of talking partnership while re-building through controlled struggle. Their model for doing so was the US union, the SEIU.

THE SEIU MODEL

The SEIU became a model for many union leaders in the 1990s because it has bucked trend of decline and almost doubled its numbers. It achieved fame through its Justice for Janitors

¹⁵ E. Heery, M. Simms, R. Delbridge, J. Salmon, D. Simpson, "Union organizing in Britain: A survey of policy and practice", *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, Vol. 11 (2000), 986 - 1007.

campaign in 1989 and then went on to pioneer the organising model within the AFL-CIO. After failing to make headway, it split from the wider federation to form a new Change to Win grouping in 2005 and has played an increased emphasis on global union alliances and exporting its organising model to other countries.

Milkman and Voss argue that the key to the SEIU's success is changing,

their internal organisational practices to shift staff resources to organising. This means shifting priorities away from servicing current members and towards unionising new ones – creating more organiser positions on the staff; developing programmes to teach current members how to handle the tasks involved in shop floor grievances so that existing staff are freed up to work on organising; and building programmes that train members to participate fully in the world of external organising.¹⁶

In order to effect this change, the SEIU argued that 30 percent of the union's dues had to be devoted to organising. It systematically recruited ex-students with a track record of campaigning to take up posts in its professional organising unit. Alongside other unions such as UNITE-HERE, it placed a major emphasis on recruiting migrant workers and changing its image so that it reflects the diversity of the modern workforce. The union has also pioneered a limited confrontational approach where, through a host of ruthless tactics, pressure was brought to bear on employers who refuse to accept unions. Alongside traditional tactics of taking industrial action, these included naming and shaming individual employers, demonstrations that have culminated in mass arrests, consumer boycotts and interventions at shareholder meetings. Instead of a haphazard approach to organising, the SEIU systematically targeted particular industries where sought higher union density in order to gain leverage.

Alongside the limited openings for struggle, the SEIU advocated top down centralisation of the union machinery and structures that minimised member involvement. Milkman and Voss, who are sympathetic to the SEIU's approach, argue that 'in unions that *have* been successfully transformed, the process has typically been orchestrated from the top, contrary to the rather romantic view that only the rank and file can be the fount of democratic change' (Milkman and Voss p.7). The result is a deep tension in the SEIU's approach. The union promotes rhetoric of membership activism and empowerment but organises those very members into ever-larger branch structures where leaderships are effectively appointed from the top. Membership involvement in union elections has been cut back and voting has been transferred to convention delegates who are more tightly controlled by a centralised leadership. Michael Piore has described the organisational ethos of the union's leadership,

The ideas that underline it were drawn from the business management literature. The staff read widely in the business press and the more scholarly literature as well. Their

¹⁶ Milkman and Voss, *Rebuilding Labor: Organizing and Organizers in the New Union Movement*, Cornell University Press, 2004.

single most important source was probably the *Harvard Business Review*. As noted, the union hired the American Management Association to do staff training.

The main reason for the emphasis on a top down type of trade unionism is that the purpose of limited confrontation tactics is to win union recognition in order to forge partnership with the employers. The SEIU argues that it can bring 'added value' to employers as well as improving their members' conditions. In a recent interview SEIU leader Andy Stern spelled this out,

Well, first of all, one strategy we're considering is actually to work with our employers to try to see if we can have a different kind of relationship, you know, where we don't start off assuming we're going to create problems, but we try to solve problems, and we're seeing a lot of good new results by trying to think about how do we help workers and how do we help companies at the same time.¹⁷

This 'partnership plus' approach has meant that the union often tries to break into a particular industry and then offers a neutrality agreement to employers so that they facilitate union organisation. Some neutrality agreements even give employers the power to decide which workers might be eligible for union membership and what proportion of their company can be organised!

The attractions of the SEIU organising model for Irish union leaders should now be clear. Towards the end of the partnership period, it seemed to provide both a ready made template for dealing with the problem of declining density and at the same time allowed them some space to develop a dual strategy of limited confrontation in order to sustain partnership. The rhetoric of the SEIU was also sufficiently distant from the left and supportive of modern corporate organisational practices to appeal to the Irish union leaders. They could talk a grand rhetoric against neoliberalism, while unleashing controlled actions in limited to show their power. And as an added bonus, they strengthen the existing trends towards centralisation in the unions. In one particularly symbolic move, the SIPTU leadership persuaded conference delegates to remove the right of ordinary members to vote for the posts of top union officers.

Yet the last year has brutally exposed the Partnership Plus model. Essentially, the model could only work if the union leaders could bluff the employers by using a limited degree of force. The essence of the strategy was to demonstrate the potential power the union leaders had to unleash talks – and to use that as leverage to enforce partnership. But when the crash occurred the game quickly changed. IBEC boldly called for pay cuts, demanding an across the board 'downward adjustment' of 10 percent in 2009. They soon won the FF-Green government to this strategy and an all out war was launched against the unions. All pretence of a balanced media was dropped as the employers used both RTE and the private corporate media as a weapon against organised workers. In such a war, there was little room for bluffing. The union leaders had to either fight seriously – with no matter what the consequences this posed for Irish capitalism. Or else succumb in a pathetic manner to the

¹⁷ Democracy Now, 2006.

new demands of a brutal insane system,. Understanding why they failed to fight takes us to the heart of the Marxist approach to the union bureaucracy.

TRADE UNIONISM AND BUREAUCRACY

Trade unions are the collective organisations of the working class. Their primary aim, as we have seen, is to reduce competition between workers by combining together. When workplaces are non-union, employers have discretion to pay different individual rates to keep workers divided and to support their favourites. When there is organisation, an ethos of solidarity exists that militates against 'market forces'. But while unions contain a potential opposition to the logic of capitalism, they are also inherently defensive organisations. Unless they are deeply politicised, they are shaped by the limits of a capitalist society.

The unions bargain over the *price* of labour but accept the fact that human labour is a commodity that is sold to owners of companies. They accept the right of employers – within the limits of an agreed industrial legality – to hire and fire and to organise production solely for profit. The union also organises on *sectional* lines, reflecting the divisions of the labour market – so teachers organise with teachers or office workers organise in different union branches to the manual workers in the same company. The unions separate political struggles from economic struggles, often claiming that they cannot engage in political strikes even when this involves the privatisation of state companies. While victories for workers can be secured despite these limitations, permanent victories cannot be won until we remove capitalism.

Within the unions, a bureaucracy grows which promotes an acceptance of capitalism. This bureaucracy is a distinct social strata, which has a more privileged position than the majority of workers. It is composed of full time union officials and union leaders and is distinct from elected shop stewards or union reps. Typically, though not always, this bureaucracy is appointed to their posts rather than elected. They are paid a salary that is well above that of their members. The top union leaders of SIPTU and IMPACT, for example, are paid between €120,000 and €150,000 a year. They bargain over the conditions of their members – but do not have to work under these conditions themselves. A union leader, for example, who trades extra productivity concessions for a small wage rise will never experience the stress or hardship experienced by members who are asked 'to give more'. Nor are union officials surrounded by fellow workers who can bring them to account for the deals they have done. The main concern of the union bureaucracy becomes the preservation of the apparatus of the union - rather than the winning of struggles. This is why union leaders invariably call for 'respect for the law' even when laws like the Industrial Relations Act prevents effective picketing.

The union bureaucracy also places a huge emphasis on keep a negotiating relationship with employers – even when that is detrimental to the interests of workers. They do not encourage workers to break bad deals that are signed in difficult times less that upset their 'professional' relationship with human resources managers.

Two issues follow from our description of union bureaucrats as a distinct social stratum. First, the problem with union bureaucrats does not stem primarily from their individual

politics – but the particular social position they occupy. There is a left and a right wing in the union bureaucracy and there are clear differences between Jimmy Kelly, the leader of UNITE and Peter McCloone, the former leader of IMPACT. The left talks a more radical language and even gives support to more workers' struggles. But even the best left wing officials are trapped in a structure that plays down the self-activity of workers when it comes up against the limits of capitalism. This means that even if decent left wing activists are elected, they can still succumb to the bureaucratic structures if there is not a countervailing power.

While supporting the left against the right in union elections, rank and file organisation is therefore the key to change. Rank and file organisation arises from the experience of workplace struggles and the networks forged in the course of wider struggles. When it emerges as a reform movement within the unions, it should seek to subject any candidates it promotes for union offices to its own structures of accountability. The presence of such grassroots organisation – rather than the personal integrity of individual or political viewpoints of individual leaders – is therefore the best way to achieve a fighting union organisation.

Second, because the union bureaucracy is a strata *within* the labour movement it is, therefore, distinct from both the capitalist class and its state. The position of the union leader depends upon the organisation of workers who contribute dues to defend their conditions. If union density drops to a low point because workers leave the union, the position of the union leadership itself is also in danger. Union officials are, therefore, compelled to take measures, which defend union organisation but do so in a weak manner that accepts the limits of the system. The complex position of the union bureaucracy can therefore be best summarised as follows:

Like the God Janus, it presents two faces: it balances between the employers and the workers. It holds back and controls workers struggles but it has a vital interest not to push collaboration with the employers to the point where it makes the union completely impotent.

If the union bureaucracy strays too far into the bourgeois camp it will lose its base. The bureaucracy has an interest in preserving the union organisation, which is the source of their income and social status.¹⁸

Socialists support any forward movement to promote workers interests – even when led by right wing bureaucrats and even if the action is tokenistic. In the course of these struggles, workers who were previously passive can be stirred into action – and come to see the limitations of the very leaders who began the fight. An attitude of cynical, embittered indifference to struggles initiated by union leaders has no place in a socialist outlook. We enthusiastically support every fight against the main enemy, which is the capitalist class – and promote whatever measures are necessary to win, even when union bureaucrats oppose them.

¹⁸ T. Cliff & D. Gluckstein, *Marxism and Trade Union Struggle*, (London: Bookmarks, 1986), 27.

Despite the stranglehold that the union bureaucracy exercise over the movement, there are long memories of a different tradition available to workers. Two great revolutionary socialists, James Connolly and Jim Larkin, were centrally involved in the development of the Irish trade union movement. Connolly's approach to trade unionism sums up the revolutionary socialist attitude to this day. He wrote:

No consideration of a contract with a section of the capitalist class absolved any section of us from the duty of taking instant action to protect other sections when they were in danger from the capitalist enemy.

Our attitude was that in the swiftness and unexpectedness of our action lay our chief hopes of temporary victory, and since permanent victory was an illusionary hope until permanent victory was secured, temporary victories were all that need concern us.¹⁹

The language is somewhat archaic for the contemporary reader but it is still deeply relevant for today. Connolly argues, firstly, that we do not respect contracts with employers. As long as we live in a capitalist society, we are forced to make such compromises – but we will break them if necessary to advance the struggles of our class. Secondly, he contends that the socialist and trade union motto is: 'An injury to one, is an injury to all.' Therefore we always press for solidarity as soon as any group of workers confront their employer. If we can deliver solidarity action or boycotts or just financial collections, we will do our utmost to deliver. Thirdly, Connolly argues that the permanent victory of workers can only come with uprooting the present system. So in every fight, we keep that goal in mind and judge our progress by how much the fighting spirit of workers has become politicised.

This tradition of revolutionary trade unionism was destroyed by a union bureaucracy which grew through its accommodation the newly formed Irish Free State. William O'Brien, for example, expelled Jim Larkin, from his own union. O'Brien eventually brought the union movement into the orbit of Fianna Fail. Under the guise of attacking British based unions, he aligned the workers movement with the needs of Irish capitalism. At the end of his life he was nominated to the board of the Central Bank. He began a tradition which culminated in David Begg occupying a similar position on a bank that turned a blind eye to the vast speculative activities of modern Irish capitalism.

A key element of the consolidation of the power of the power union bureaucracy was an ideology that subordinated the interests of workers to the needs of the Irish economy. Trade unionism came to be dominated by an economic nationalism whereby Irish workers and employers joined together to win the battle for 'competitiveness'. In the sixties, the union were co-opted onto Adaptation Boards that were supposed to prepare Irish industry for open competition in an era of free trade. In the eighties, the same ideology economic nationalism led to two decades of economic partnership. It began when the ICTU did a deal with the corrupt FF leader, Charles Haughey, to cut 20,000 jobs from the public sector to 'help the economy'. During the partnership years, the union leaders were drawn ever closer to the state machinery and dovetailed the union policies with the needs of Irish capitalism.

¹⁹ O.D. Edwards & B. Ranson, *James Connolly: Selected Writings* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1973), 313.

The full extent of this disastrous legacy is now coming home to roost. During the boom years, the dovetailing of workers interests with that of Irish capitalism meant the unions embraced a low tax economic strategy as Ireland position itself as the Atlantic tax haven of Europe. Instead of even shifting a modest proportion of wealth thrown up by the boom into high quality public services the bureaucrats were happy to accept tax cuts in return for low wage rises. The state – and the wider society – in effect subsidised the employer class by allowing them to retrain wages when labour was in high demand. When the crash hit suddenly, workers found that they had gained little when conditions were most favourable to them

One of the main tasks facing socialists today is to work towards a strategy to take the unions back from the bureaucrats who have brought such disaster. This will mean promoting a strategy for the union movement that prepares it for struggle rather than an accommodation with the needs of Irish capitalism. Some of the main elements of an alternative vision for the union might include policies such as:

- Elect all union officials and pay them the average industrial wage.
- Establish a procedure to re-call union leaders so they are answerable to their members.
- Return to annual union conferences and decrease unnecessary delegates expenses.
- Abolish the two-tier picket system – respect all pickets for workers rights.
- Defy the Industrial Relations Act – take measures to prevent the sequestration of union funds.
- Oppose social partnership – build fighting trade unions.
- For grassroots trade unionism – regular assemblies of workers; no secret deals with managers; no ‘selling’ of deals that weaken union militancy.
- Oppose all wages cuts, attacks on overtime rates or shift allowances.
- End the givebacks that come with talk of ‘flexibility’.
- Resistance to redundancies. Where employers claim difficulty, demand that they open all their account books. Where large workplaces say they are not viable, demand nationalisation to keep jobs.
- For a 35-hour week and public works schemes to give work to the unemployed.
- For class struggle trade unionism that adopts an anti-capitalist outlook