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# Sandino Socialists, Flagwaving Comrades, Red Rabblers: The Struggle for a Left Praxis in Northern Ireland

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**SANDINO SOCIALISTS,**

**FLAG-WAVING COMRADES,**

**RED RABBLE-ROUSERS:**

**THE STRUGGLE FOR A LEFT PRAXIS IN NORTHERN IRELAND**

**By Benny Witkovsky**

**SIT: Transformation of Social and Political Conflict**

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**Spring 2011**

## **ABSTRACT**

This paper is the outcome of three weeks of research on Left politics in Northern Ireland. Taking the 2011 Assembly Elections as my focal point, I conducted a number of interviews with candidates and supporters, attended meetings and rallies, and participated in neighborhood canvasses. These experiences led me to two contrasting conclusions: in many ways the Left in Northern Ireland appears disconnected from contemporary political scene; and the Left has an important critique to offer the region regarding Sectarianism, the economic collapse and post-Good Friday Accords politics. Finally, by discussing changes to the Lefts theories, organizations and environment, I attempt to reexamine the Left and illustrate how they might overcome this disconnect and gain support for their proposals. These transformations have only just begun, as they take shape, the Left attempts to realize their platforms will become more important, more dynamic, and more critical to research.

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Conall McDevitt

Lynda Walker

Owen

and Paddy Meehan

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## **GLOSSARY and ACRONYMS**

CPI – Communist Party of Ireland

Dáil – The Parliament of the Republic of Ireland

DUP- Democratic Unionist Party

GFA – Good Friday Accords – Peace Agreement signed in Northern Ireland in 1998

MLA – Member of the Legislative Assembly

Nationalist – Person – frequently Catholic – who believes Northern Ireland should join the Republic of Ireland as a united country.

NILP – Northern Irish Labour Party (active from 1924-1987)

NIPC – Northern Ireland Political Collection – Collection of all documents published related to the Troubles at the Linen Hall Library in Belfast

PBP – People Before Profit Alliance (the most recent incarnation of the Socialist Worker's Party)

PIRA – Provisional Irish Republican Army – since 1972, the more anti-Marxist, more violent Republican paramilitary group.

PUP – Progressive Unionist Party

OIRA – Official Irish Republican Army – since 1972, the more Marxist oriented Republican paramilitary group with some ties to the Worker's Party and CPI.

SDLP – Social Democratic and Labour Party

SEA – Socialist Environmentalist Alliance (SWP group in early 2000s)

SP – Socialist Party

Stormont – The Legislative Assembly of Northern Ireland

SWM – Socialist Worker's Movement

SWP – Socialist Worker's Party – the Socialist Worker's Movement after 1997.

TD - Teachta Dála – Member of the Republic of Ireland Parliament

ULA – United Left Alliance – Alliance formed between People Before Profit and the Socialist Party for the 2011 Elections in the Republic, proposed but not yet enacted in the North.

Unionist – Person – frequently Protestant – who believes Northern Ireland should remain a part of the United Kingdom.

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## INTRODUCTION

I arrived in Dublin this January amidst the excitement and turmoil of the Irish (and worldwide) financial collapse and the 2011 elections. A sign for the newly formed United Left Alliance (ULA) caught my eye and spiked my curiosity in Irish Left<sup>1</sup> politics. Following this initial interest I had several conversations with members of the Socialist Worker's Party (SWP) and attended a few events at Connolly Books put on by the Communist Party of Ireland (CPI). Because of my family background, upbringing in Madison Wisconsin, and education at several likeminded schools, I have always had a left/socialist bent to my thinking and politics. However, I had seen Left parties in the states as wishful unrealistic ideologues and never as the viable alternatives I saw in the ULA in Ireland. I realized as I delved further into Left politics (in Northern Ireland now) for this paper that people tended to approach the Left parties in the same way that I approached those in the States – marginal, out-of-touch, powerless. But something in being a stranger to this context allowed me to take them a bit more seriously and I think that that - perhaps misguided - approach has been productive.

Beyond a personal and political desire to see Left politics as a viable alternative to the status quo take root anywhere, as a student focusing in issues of Peace and Conflict I was attracted to Socialist/Marxist politics in Northern Ireland for several academic reasons. Primarily I find that Marxism's critique of ethno-

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<sup>1</sup> I struggled for sometime deciding how to name the politics I am referring to, not all of the parties are Socialist, not every member would identify as Marxist – the word “Left” seems most general and most inclusive which is why I chose it, however I do not want to give the mistaken impression that these parties all act as one unified Left.

national identities and the way they divide the working classes to be powerful way of reframing the conflict in Northern Ireland and begging for an alternative. In addition, from the work of Johann Galtung I come to the belief that economic inequality and poverty are themselves forms of violence – thus any “Peace Process” that doesn’t include redistribution of wealth and an economic leveling of society cannot rightly be called one (Galtung, 1969). In the Northern Irish Left I hoped to find these two critiques of the current state of Northern Ireland and alternative solutions proposed to redirect the Peace Process here.

Combining these interests in Left politics and the current political situation in Northern Ireland led me to examine the Left parties and their campaigns in the 2011 Assembly Elections. As I spent time with these parties and politicians I found myself simultaneously enthralled by the ideas they espoused and disenchanted by their isolation and powerlessness. While this was politically unsettling, it proved analytically productive, leaving me with the questions that make the basis of this paper. What causes the Left parties to appear so disconnected from the political reality? Why don’t people take them seriously? And what is lost – what ideas, proposals and potential for progress overlooked – by writing these parties off? And finally, what would the Left parties need to do to change this perception and gain more support, is there any hope that their valuable ideas will not be disregarded? By examining Left politics as a struggle for political praxis – an attempt to take theory and implement it to change society – space opens to counter the dominant perceptions of the Left and to demonstrate how their analyses of sectarianism and the economic collapse could gain ground in the future. Because it marks the



conclusion of the first full term of Stormont since the Good Friday Accords and because it coincides with four billion pounds of cuts coming through the executive, the current election marks a significant moment in Northern Irish political history. But as the people vote on May 5<sup>th</sup> it is uncertain whether the Left will fair any better than they have before, but I think the developments on the Left show that their fight is far from over.

### **METHODOLOGY**

I conducted this research over a period of about three weeks, including one week in Derry and two weeks in Belfast. In that time I engaged in several methodological approaches including: participant observation, interviews, and perusal of both primary and secondary sources. Looking back over the experience, I think that my background predisposed me to see the people and events I witnessed in a positive light, to accept a Marxist analysis as generally true, Socialism as a generally good project – and though I have tried, these things my have made me somewhat less critical of the theory and activities I encountered. The 2011 Assembly elections provided an excellent background against which to study these groups: there were more meetings, more events, more people to talk to than I would have found at any other time. The parties operating at hyper-speed for the election brought things out and highlighted things that I wouldn't have seen otherwise, but this also means that this research would possibly be hard to reproduce at any other time.

As a facet of my research I participated in activities with the various parties ranging from canvassing to celebrating. I went out canvassing with the Socialist Party in South Belfast (Lagan Bank) and I attended several of their meetings, both public and private. With People Before Profit I attended two rallies, the campaign launch, Eamonn McCann's filing of his election papers, and celebratory drinks afterwards, as well as spending some time just hanging around their office opposite the Guild Hall in Derry.

In terms of interviews, I was graciously afforded considerable amounts of time for private interviews with a number of people involved in these issues in Belfast and Derry. I interviewed two sitting Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) at their offices in Belfast: Dawn Purvis (East Belfast, Independent, formerly the leader of the Progressive Unionist Party) and Conall McDevitt (South Belfast, Social Democratic Labour Party). I also met with several current candidates for the Assembly and local councils: Paddy Meehan (South Belfast, Socialist Party), Connor Kelly (Derry Cityside, People Before Profit), Diane Greer (Derry Rural, PBP), and Eamonn McCann (Foyle, PBP). In addition to that I also had time with a few leaders and supporters of the parties who were not currently running: Dermie McLenaghan (Former Civil Rights Movement leader and PBP supporter)<sup>2</sup>, Roisin Kelly (PBP office manager), and Lynda Walker (CPI chairwoman).

My sample in terms of my observation and interviews has a number of potential issues. My experiences focused primarily on People Before Profit and the

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<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately I could not include this interview in my paper, but see the appendix for Dermie's story of the Civil Rights Movement and his turn toward Socialism.

Socialist Party. Aside from my interview with Lynda Walker I had little contact with the Communist Party, and no contact with the Worker's Party. This is largely due to a lack of time and contacts in the other parties, but to some extent is also representative of the fact that the Worker's Party seems to have fewer public events and their website provides less personal details about their candidates and staff. I have tried to balance this bias with extra research, but my paper will reflect the greater amount of time I spent with People Before Profit and the Socialist Party.

The groups I observed and talked to also over-represent men and people from Catholic/Nationalist backgrounds. I interviewed five men and four women and the groups I watched tended to be anywhere from 10%-50% women. While it seemed to be conventional understanding in the groups I talked to that women were underrepresented in both Left politics and all politics in Northern Ireland, it is unclear to me if that discrepancy is wholly representative of the actual state of women in Left politics, or if some of it has to do with my methodology. Of those I interviewed only Dawn Purvis and Diane Greer were from Protestant/Unionist backgrounds.<sup>3</sup> As I will discuss later, Left politics do seem to have stronger support in the Catholic/Nationalist communities, but I am unsure if the representation in my paper is on par with their representation in the various movements/parties.

Another challenge in drawing conclusions from my research is that most of my contacts with People Before Profit were in Derry and most of my contacts with the Socialist Party were in Belfast. To some extent this is an accurate representation

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<sup>3</sup> I do not know Communist Party Chairwoman Lynda Walker's religious background, but as she was raised in Sheffield, England I have counted her as neither Unionist or Nationalist.

of the field: the Socialist Party would like to see Eamonn McCann from PBP elected even though he is not their candidate so they have avoided running candidates in Derry. However, they do overlap in Belfast in a few districts where they are both running candidates. This becomes important when I attempt to compare/differentiate between the two parties as I am unsure what happens because of party policy and what because of geographic location – for example, the Socialist Party seems to have a stronger connection to organized labour, but that may simply be because the trade unions are stronger in the more industrialized Belfast.

Finally, due to my focus on the 2011 Assembly election, my data is skewed toward those members of the Left who choose to engage in electoral politics. There are Leftists, like most of the Communist Party, who believe that electoral politics are not a feasible way of realizing Socialism. There are those who focus on labour issues or community issues and see elections as a distraction from that or as simply less fruitful. While I will touch on those issues, they are not the focus of my paper in the way that Left electoral politics are.

The most fruitful written sources I have found were publications by the parties themselves, both on their websites and in hard copy in the Northern Ireland Political Collection (NIPC) at the Linen Hall Library. The most useful of these have been the SWP's "The Case For Socialism (1995)" and articles from their magazine *Resistance* published from 2001-2003. The Socialist Party's website has been an invaluable research and I have utilized several essays found there including:

“Toward Division Not Peace”, “Defending Real Trade Unionism”, and “The Struggle For Socialism Today”, all by Peter Hadden.

The NIPC also housed some interesting critiques written by various dissenters from the parties which provided an interesting perspective on the Left parties and their work, among these was Eamonn Smullen’s (former Worker’s Party, Sinn Fein and IRA member) “Critique of the Political Economy of Socialism” and Robin Wilson’s “Between the Armalite and the Ballot Box.” While these documents may be flawed due to their author’s bias and their datedness, I still found them helpful as counters to the propositions I found in the party literature.

Secondary sources were a little bit harder to come by. I suspect the paucity of sources about Left politics in Northern Ireland might be connected to the fact that most people steeped in the political reality of Northern Ireland do not see Socialism as a meaningful presence. Despite this, Emmett O’Connor’s “Labor and Left Politics” and Brian Hanley and Scott Millar’s *The Lost Revolution* provided valuable background on the history of Socialist movements in Northern Ireland. Peter Shirlow’s “An Elusive Agenda” and Kevin Cassidy’s “New Loyalism” have both presented useful analyses of the current situation of class division and consciousness in Northern Ireland. It is my hope that my research – because as an outsider I didn’t know what I should rightfully ignore – might provide a more complete look into the current state of Left politics in Northern Ireland and what hope for some success they might actually hold in the near future.

Somewhat surprisingly to me party websites, Facebook, Twitter and social networking sites in general were invaluable to me in this research. Nearly every party and most candidates had a Facebook or Twitter and utilizing these sites allowed me to hear of rallies, meetings, and other developments as they were happening. I highlight this not only as a tip for future researchers in this field, but also as an interesting example of the way that Left parties are adapting in order to best reach their audiences.

Finally I have to note just how welcoming and inclusive the members of these parties were. In Derry, with People Before Profit, I simply walked into the office one morning and was invited to participate in a week's worth of events. I gave my phone number to a Socialist Party member at a public meeting and was subsequently alerted to several meetings and invited out canvassing every day that week. I could not have gotten half of the information I did in this project had the parties and participant not been so accommodating and inviting.

### **PARTY OVERVIEW**

My research focuses on the workings of four of the major Left parties in Northern Ireland: The Socialist Party, The People Before Profit Alliance, The Worker's Party, and the Communist Party of Ireland. Sinn Fein, the Social Democratic and Labour Party, and the Progressive Unionist Party are all mainstream parties that identify as Left, but as they still register as Nationalist or Unionist – and I am primarily interested in the Socialist challenge to sectarianism – I will not spend a lot of time discussing them. On the other side, Alliance is a party

that does not identify as either Nationalist or Unionist, however, they do not actively pursue a Left agenda in other regards and as I am interested in the interplay between those two facets, I will not analyze them at any great length. For the reader's and my own sake of clarity, I will now briefly lay out the history, key players and platforms of the four major Left parties.

The Socialist Party of Ireland is an all Ireland party with an active section in Northern Ireland. Initially known as the Militant and then Militant Labour, the Socialist Party (so known since 1997) was born out of the Northern Ireland Labour Party's (NILP) retreat from a more strident Left, non-sectarian platform in the early 1970s (Meehan, Paddy. Personal Interview. 18 Apr. 2011). In the Republic of Ireland the Socialist Party has enjoyed some success with member Joe Higgins serving in the Dáil (the parliament of the Republic of Ireland) and the European Parliament since 1997; in the 2011 election as a part of the ULA the Socialist Party garnered two seats in the Dáil and one seat in the European Parliament. Based in Belfast in the North, the Socialist Party has previously run candidates in local and Assembly elections with little success. This year they are putting up four candidates: Tommy Black, East Belfast and Pottinger; Paddy Meehan, South Belfast and Laganbank; Pat Lawler, West Belfast and Lower Falls; and Donal O'Cofaigh (formerly a Sinn Fein Councilor) Enniskillen and Fermanagh District Council ([www.socialistpartyni.net](http://www.socialistpartyni.net))

The People Before Profit Alliance was born in the Republic in 2005 and in Northern Ireland in 2009; PBP is self described as "A broad left alliance of socialists, environmentalists, workers, unions, Catholics, Protestants" and though it does not

define itself as Socialist or Revolutionary it has “many members who are socialist and even revolutionary socialists” (Kelly, Connor. Personal Interview. 4 Apr. 2011)

This alliance came primarily from a joining of the Socialist Worker’s Party, the Community Worker’s Action Group, and members of the Campaign for an Independent Left – despite this, it tends to be seen as synonymous with the Socialist Workers Party and periodically referred to by detractors as a “front organization.”

The Socialist Workers Movement (later the Socialist Workers Party) was founded in 1971 by International Socialists and members of the student movement People’s Democracy, broadly speaking it was a part of the same move away from the NILP that gave rise to the Socialist Party. It has run candidates in elections in the Republic and Northern Ireland under its own name as well as part of the Socialist Environmental Alliance and now People Before Profit. Eamonn McCann has been their major candidate in the North and has come the closest of any on the Left to actually being elected. In the South, People Before Profit reaped some political success as part of the United Left Alliance electing two *Tiachta Dala* (members of the Irish Parliament, TD) and five local councilors.<sup>4</sup> They are currently running Eamonn McCann for assembly in Foyle; Diane Greer, Connor Kelly, Colm Bryce and Davey McAuley for Derry City Council; and Gerry Carrol, Dymphna McGlade and, Brian Faloon for Belfast City Council ([peoplebeforeprofit.ie](http://peoplebeforeprofit.ie)).

The history of the Worker’s Party is more complicated and more deeply entwined with the history of Republicanism in Northern Ireland. In 1977 Sinn Fein

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voted to become “Sinn Fein the Worker’s Party” and to pursue a more socialist platform. In 1982 it voted to drop Sinn Fein and become just the Worker’s Party in an attempt to distance itself from the violence and ensuing sectarian division brought on by the Provisional IRA (Hanley and Millar 2009, 438). Though the Worker’s Party no longer identifies as a Republican or Nationalist party and frequently stresses the destructive qualities of sectarianism, they have had some difficulty shaking off their Republican history. They would consider themselves less a part of the “ultra-left” and Trotskyite movements that the SP and SWP belong to and have not joined them in the ULA in the South (Hanley and Millar 2009, 456). Having their strongest success in the mid 1980s, sending seven members to the Dáil, they have struggled to rebuild their electoral capacity since then. They are currently running John Lavery in North Belfast, Paddy Lynn in South Belfast, Kevin McNally in East Belfast and John Lowry in West Belfast ([www.workerspartyireland.net](http://www.workerspartyireland.net)).

The Communist Party of Ireland is the islands oldest Left party, founded out of the Revolutionary Workers’ Group in 1933 and first chaired by James Larkin Jr. United into an all-Ireland party in 1970, the CPI has struggled with both its connections to the former Soviet Union and to the Original IRA. Chairwoman Lynda Walker insists that they had no connection to the IRA and only a brief exploratory relationship with Sinn Fein - which they saw as “a potentially progressive and anti-imperialist force,” – however, Hanley’s book portrays a more complicated and interconnected relationship: documenting decades of secret meetings, alliances and competition for the political support of the USSR (Hanley and Millar 2009). Either way, the Communist Party has not been able to gain much traction anywhere in

Northern Ireland or the Republic and has not run candidates in either election for the last decade. They do however maintain an active role in the trade unions, women's movements, and other campaigns (as well as keeping a radical bookshop in Dublin's Temple Bar neighborhood) (Walker, Lynda. Personal Interview. 14 Apr. 2011).

## **ANALYSIS**

### **LEAVING SANDINO'S: THE ISOLATION OF THE LEFT**

"The Socialists? What do they know? They never even leave Sandino's!" (Terry, Group Discussion. 5 Apr. 2011). Sandino's, a Derry pub named for the Nicaraguan revolutionary plastered with radical memorabilia and tchotchkes, has long been the city's lefty hangout (indeed when a gas leak hit the PBP office they temporarily set up shop at a table there). To some in Derry it has come to symbolize the Left's isolation and disconnect from the real world. Socialism is about late night arguments between balding radicals drinking around a dark bar; Socialism is not a legitimate proposal for politics in this society. This perception has tended to alienate the Left from their constituents and delegitimize their campaigns and political potential. Beyond inhibiting prospective support, this disconnection poses a serious threat to the credibility of their platform. Eamonn McCann has been a fierce critic of Republicanism and how they have "Never had a democratic mandate, never been accountable to the people, but they still claim to act in their name," unfortunately the same could be said of the Left (McCann, Eamonn. Speaking to SIT. 15 Mar. 2011). If they cannot mobilize a stronger base, how much longer can they claim to

represent the Working Class? Can they really claim to be a party of the people, or does their entire platform fall apart without that popular support? While this disconnect and isolation is not the whole story of the Left in Northern Ireland, because it is the dominant understanding, it merits some examination.

This isolation becomes most pronounced in the Left's recent electoral history. They talk about sending a message to Stormont, shaking it up, giving it a good opposition, but then they get nearly no support to do that. In the last ten years the Socialist Party, the Worker's Party and People Before Profit/Socialist Environmental Alliance, have consistently run candidates in Belfast, Derry and scattered other places around the region and come away with less than one percent of the vote. The Worker's Party is the worst in this regard, for example John Lowry and Patrick Lynn have run in South and West Belfast in every election since 2003 and received 200-400 votes each time. The Socialist Party is starting to perform somewhat better (likely because they seem to concentrate their resources in fewer districts), but at the same time Thomas Black has run in most of the elections since the Good Friday Agreement and has consistently received about 200 votes and his comrades have not fared much better. People Before Profit have done better, mainly because of Eamonn McCann who received nearly 3,000 votes in his last election, but still they cannot claim to have any significant electoral support ([www.ark.ac.uk/elections](http://www.ark.ac.uk/elections)).

Party members tend to brush off these results with statements like "We on the Left have always been skeptical of elections and the possibility of change

through electoral politics” (McCann, Eamonn. Personal Interview. 7 Apr. 2011) and “Elections are only a snapshot of the political moment, we are more concerned about growing the party and the campaigns that come afterward” (Meehan)<sup>5</sup>. This has certainly been the position of the Communist Party for the last decade, as Chairwoman Lynda Walker explained, “We have our doubts about mode of campaigning, about the amount of effort and money it takes to stand just for the small amount of votes we’ll get. But it’s good publicity...” (Walker). Whether socialism can ever be realized through electoral politics is a legitimate argument and a worthwhile debate, but shouldn’t this lack of electoral support send signals to the parties that their message may not be totally in-step with the needs of the Working Class?

It is also important to note that their lukewarm reception is not only at the ballot box. Of all the meetings and rallies I attended in my research I don’t think I ever saw one that had over fifty (maybe seventy-five at most) participants. In contrast, the SDLP and some independent groups organized a relatively impromptu peace rally one day in Belfast that brought a hundred people with almost no advertising (perhaps this could be because they are, as one of my contacts described “the official wing of the Catholic Church).

One possible explanation for this isolation is that the Left has used its rhetoric and writings to alienate themselves from the major blocs one might expect to support them. The relationship between the parties and the trade unions of

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<sup>5</sup> I will use only the speaker’s last name to refer to personal interviews the second and subsequent times I quote them.

Northern Ireland is a clear example of this. While the Fire Brigade Union wrote a letter of support for Eamonn McCann and many of the candidates and party members are themselves members of trade unions, the unions have failed to come out en masse to express their solidarity. The frustration at this caution came to a head at the Socialist Party campaign launch with candidate Tommy Black declaring, “Look what the unions accomplished in London, 500,000 people marching in the street, think of what we could achieve if they only got involved here” and another audience member standing up and demanding, “where are the unions, where is the leadership, why aren’t they here” (Black, Tommy. Socialist Party Launch. 7 Apr. 2011).

In both my background research and field experience I encountered many explanations as to how their committed attempts to negotiate the sectarian divide and their relationship to the state through Northern Ireland’s partnership policy have made the trade unions of Northern Ireland politically timid (O’Connor 1996; People Before Profit Launch; socialistparty.net). But doesn’t it still seem surprising that the country with one of the highest union memberships in Europe would have such a small Socialist movement? I think it can partially be blamed on the aggressive attitude the parties have taken against trade unions. I heard numerous calls for trade unions to end their “collusion” and “cozy relationship with the bosses” and the Socialist Party even went as far to publish an extended argument with the leaders of a major union decrying their negotiations to end a strike (Hadden 2008).

This isolation can also be found in the fact that, despite defining themselves as parties that should play in both Unionist and Nationalist communities, they can't get a significant following in either. To Catholics, Socialism demands recognizing Protestant workers as allies and not enemies, and to supplant the desire for a united Ireland with a commitment to working class politics in Northern Ireland. While McCann argues that this should appeal to the working class Catholic community, he admits that "deserting the nationalism feels like betrayal. There are two separate things going on, they can see that the approach of Working Class politics makes sense, but the Community tugs people back all the time" (McCann). On the other side, Socialism asks people to challenge the society they see and to unite to work for a better one, which might explain why, as Protestant PBP candidate Diane Greer notes, "Socialism is still very much seen as outside the bounds of the Protestant community. There is a tradition in the Protestant community of acceptance and loyalty to the state" (Greer, Diane. Personal Interview. 7 Apr. 2011). The Left parties manage to alienate Catholics by seeming to accept the Union, at least initially, while at the same alienating Protestants by appearing to be too much a part of the Republican project.

By highlighting the Left parties' conflicts with trade unions and Protestant and Catholic communities I do not mean to be overly critical of any specific policies or actions by the parties. However, it demonstrates that when the parties speak about workers' issues, they do so without the support of the official representation of those workers. And when they discuss sectarianism and the need to build a cross-community alliance, they frequently do so without the support of a majority of

people in either community. These sharpen questions about how legitimate it is for the Left parties to continue to act in these ways without the accountability and support of those they claim to work in the name of. This dissonance between the Left parties and those who should support it led Eamonn Smullen, in his essay on the death of Socialism, to glibly conclude, “You want to know what’s wrong with Socialism? Ask the workers” (Smullen 1990, 5)

The images of disconnect and isolation extend beyond numbers of people and blocs of support. An element of anachronism and ignorance of the contemporary political reality pervades much of the debate and campaigning of these parties. This tends to give me the impression – and perspective voters as well I would imagine – that these people might not have the awareness or political savvy to successfully implement their proposals. For they do in some cases, appear stuck in the 1970s, the 40s or even 1917.

Bemoaning how it impedes their ability to build a forceful political machine, Eamonn McCann explains how, “Ideological differences have a history of becoming sharply defined on the Left” (McCann). I will discuss how these differences interfere with their political success later, but it is important to see how these differences illustrate the parties’ detachment from the contemporary political moment. As I hope to illustrate, many of these schisms revolve around issues that bear almost no relevance to politics today.

Eamonn McCann draws his distinction from the other parties describing how the Socialist Party and the Communist Party were ‘wholly uncritical’ of the

supposedly Socialist nations of the world and “justified the loss of individual freedom for the sake of the Communist state, which is something I could never expect” (McCann). One member of the Socialist Party described to me how they fall out with at the Socialist Workers Party over the roll of the Israeli working class, “They see them as instruments of imperialism and have no role in the worker’s revolution, we would see them as integral to that movement.”

Some of these splits date back even further to the peak of the Soviet Union and the struggles around its future: mainly the infamous debate between Stalin and Trotsky of the 1930s. The Socialist Party and People Before Profit, as Trotskyite organizations, would see the Revolution as an international phenomenon and one that needs to be led by the people themselves: thus they minimize the importance of the nation and the specific party and decry the conservative role that the ‘Stalinist’ parties play in unions and politics (Hanley and Millar 2009, 221). On the other hand, the Worker’s Party and the Communist Party (who I never heard self identify as Stalinist) would denounce the way that the ‘fekkin Trotskyites’ have sold out the people and the republic with their internationalism and support of the EU and cooperation with other foreign bodies (Hanley and Millar 2009, 92). There is no international revolution right now, there are really no mass socialist movements left to ally with or not, besides these parties will never have the power to affect foreign policy (even if it were devolved to Northern Ireland) – the harping on these issues only contributes to the image that Left parties are blind to the realities of their political power and its position in the greater political field of the day.



To be fair, not every member or politician from these parties came off as so hung up on theoretical and historical issues. Diane Greer expressed that she understood that, “there are people who have to be able to spend all night debating various aspects of Marxist theory, that’s not my thing” (Greer). Lynda Walker also articulated that sentiment, “I have never been the one to get into arguments about theory and stuff like that, you should talk to someone else for that” (Walker). While room does seem to be opening here for groups to move out of these past debates and into a more concerted effort in the present, even their analyses of the current climate and situation in Northern Ireland tend to make them seem a bit off.<sup>6</sup>

This became most pronounced in the parties proclaimed sense of urgency to act and the importance of this moment in the arc of Socialist history. Richard Boyd Barrett, People Before Profit TD for Dun Laoghaire, encapsulated this atmosphere best in his remarks at Eamonn McCann’s launch:

There is a massive urgency now to build a movement of hope for an alternative, for everyone – comrade or not – knows that these cuts are wrong. this is an European wide project. But not confined to the boundaries of Europe, it is precisely the same thing that’s happening in the background of the Arab world. Coalitions around this is the essence of People before Profit. Its even going on in the states with demonstrations in WI. (Boyd Barrett, Richard. PBP Launch. Apr. 4 2011)

And while I cannot argue with his understanding of the present moment, I find it just a little a bit ironic that he wrote with practically the same urgency and assurance nearly 10 years ago. Drawing on international movements against the

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<sup>6</sup> The women that I talked to in these parties seemed to be the ones who focused more on practical issues and less on theory than the men, I do not know what to make of this, but it is an interesting pattern to note.

World Trade Organization and America's response to 9/11, Boyd Barrett turns back to Ireland and says:

The dramatic collapse of Fine Gael represents a clearing the decks in the right of Irish politics. AS on commentator astutely put it, 'the people voted to change the opposition.' ...A united left could offer that kind of leadership but it will require the end to petty squabbling and sniping. The SWP is committed to pursuing that end - - we hope that others on the left will join us. (Boyd Barrett 2002)

I am reminded of the American Communist newspaper *Workers' Vanguard*, which monthly reports on the news of the world and will, without fail, claim that every event demands immediate formation and support of a revolutionary workers' party. One has to wonder if everything in the present moment calls for a Socialist revolution, where is it?

If the mid-1960s were the heyday of Irish Socialist Politics with the Northern Ireland Labour Party providing a real workers alternative (as Paddy Meehan explained). And if the events of 1972 spelled out the necessity of a real united Socialist front (as McCann writes in *War and an Irish Town*). Or if, as Eamonn Smullen argued, the collapse of the Soviet Union opened the way for a new form of Socialism to blossom in Northern Ireland (Smullen 1990). Then Boyd Barrett makes his claims of the importance of the moment in 2002 and again in 2011. If all these moments were perfect for Irish Socialism, why did it never happen? And why should anyone trust that this moment is different now?

I think I am beginning to understand the emotions or psychology behind it. Watching these candidates speak, sitting in the semi-secret meetings in dark offices, taking the message to the street made me feel a part of something. It makes you

almost believe that we really are on the cusp of the revolution, and that you have a role to play. You look at these characters and are convinced you are witnessing the next Lenin, the next Trotsky, the next Che. And you want to believe everything they tell you we are capable of.

The way these parties and movements play on people's need for belonging, for hope for a sense of action is remarkable. Diane Greer explained that, "I had left organized religion years ago and I missed the feelings of belonging. I liked the people from PBP and the great sense of things changing and growing" (Greer). I am beginning to wonder how much of that sense of community and empowerment is behind what I observed as a preponderance of unemployed people volunteering, working and running for these campaigns (which is not to delegitimize the very real economic and political complaints of the unemployed). These feelings and emotions are important and powerful and maybe some of the best things parties do. However when that rhetoric, that emotional charge, is used time after time after time with no meaningful results, one has to begin to question the reality of those claims and the truth behind these parties' understandings of the situation.

Many people on the Left have begun to actively fight these perceptions of themselves, I was even told that Eamonn McCann has consciously stopped spending as much time in Sandino's these days, but the question is will it be enough? Can overtures of unity, populist campaigns and party makeovers successfully change their history? The popular image of these parties as squabbling, powerless dreamers still dominates, and periodically, they continue to be reinforced. But these parties

are not all about yelling at trade unions and arguing about the relative Socialism of the former Soviet Union, they have valuable things to say about Northern Ireland that are lost in their disconnect.

### **NOT JUST WAVING THE FLAG: THE REAL VALUE OF THE LEFT FOR NORTHERN IRELAND**

The 2011 Assembly elections have been hailed as a marker of peace and stability in the region, but with the recent murder of Ronan Kerr raising specters of Sectarian violence and the 4 billion pounds of cuts being handed down through the assembly (primarily in cuts to social services and public sector compensation) – what that peace means has come into question. The Left have developed a critique – grown out of Marx, Connolly, Gramsci and others (who they will quote to you at length) – to challenge this peace and propose alternatives. They decry Northern Ireland’s continuing Sectarian division, the way the economic crisis is being borne by the working class, and most of all the failure of the Executive to address these issues. It is this analysis, this drive for change, that I fear is lost because of the Left’s isolation and what I think could be invaluable for Northern Ireland – if only people would take them seriously.

While most of the major political players denounce Sectarianism and the violence and distrust that accompany it: the SDLP and Alliance even so far as to propose dismantling some of the region’s Sectarian apparatus (McDevitt, Conall. Personal Interview. 15 Apr. 2011), only the Left parties paired Sectarianism and the plight of the worker and proposed a comprehensive history, analysis on how it

affects the current system and solution to it. In conflicts like this there seems to be a risk of picturing the two communities as eternal primordial rivals with no chance for transformation or reconciliation. The Left perspective challenges this first by challenging the history; a SWM pamphlet 'Can Catholics and Protestants Unite' describes how "the rivalry here is not arbitrary. It has real causes, arising from the way our society works, and the way it has been run in the past, particularly in the development of Capitalists, and the interest of the capitalist class" (Hewitt 1993, 3). They argue that the State itself was developed on the principal of dividing Protestant and Catholic workers to maintain Unionist control, and that this division has persisted because it continues to be in the interest of those at the top of society to separate and weaken the working class.

The Left explanation has major flaws, as Robin Wilson describes, "It assumes that sectarianism a 'mere' superstructural phenomenon – a 'false consciousness' produced by ruling class manipulation," and in that way it overlooks the individual emotional investment put into these identities that gives them meaning (Wilson 1983, 13). The criticism says this is fundamentally insulting to the working class and cannot appeal to them because it denies their lived experience and identity. A valid argument, but on the other hand, couldn't one argue that this is the only way to open up the possibility to change that experience and identity? By articulating an alternative history and cause of construction to the Sectarian situation, the Left allow that it will not always be this way.

This leads the Left parties to a critique of the current government policies and political situation that assumes Sectarian division and its inevitable continuation. According to these parties the Good Friday Agreement has enshrined Sectarianism and division as the fundamental paradigm through which the entire country operates. In their article 'Toward Division Not Peace' the Socialist Party claims that, "The peace process had come to mean little more than a fragile agreement between political enemies at the top while society, especially the working class areas, has become more sharply and bitterly polarised" (Hadden 2001). This division, they go on, has sapped the working class of their ability to challenge those at the top and allowed the economic and political power of the elite to continue unabated.

The Socialist Workers Party goes further to emphasize how the power structure in Northern Ireland – the parties and the paramilitaries – use sectarianism to shore up their power. They use this to explain why class politics have been spurned for the communal because the "Poorest areas are where politicians and groups like the UDA have been channeling people's anger and despair not at the system but at other workers across the interface" (SWP 2002). The Socialist Party joined them in this critique at their campaign launch when spokesperson Gary Mulcahy reflected on the murder of Ronan Kerr remarking that, "the real tragedy is that now the major parties can use the attack, feed on the sectarianism, and shore up support in their own communities while ignoring the economic issues that effect us all" (Mulcahy, Gary. SP Lauch. 7 Apr. 2011). Sectarian thinking becomes a tool to

maintain the status quo and prevent all those who think outside those bounds (e.g. the Left) from gaining ground.

In the uncertainty of the current political, economic and social moment, the Left see the hold of communal politics starting to slip. With the cuts coming through Stormont and the bleak economic outlook, the difference between Protestants and Catholics is quickly eroding (if not totally gone) and the need for class based action growing dramatically. Goretti Horgan, the Chairwoman of PBP wrote that the key to challenging Sectarianism lies in that action, “Catholics and Protestants only ever came together on issues that affected them at working class level. When we are fighting on class issues, we are no longer fighting for one community or the other. We embrace our identities as part of the working class” (Horgan 2002). Beyond challenging communal identities and finding common ground, the Socialist Party argues that these struggles present a fundamental challenge to the politics of Northern Ireland as, “Class struggle can also cast a new light on the sectarian parties and the paramilitaries, opening rifts within them and loosening their grip on working class areas” (Hadden 2001). Class-consciousness and class mobilization provide not only a theoretical challenge to ethno-national division but also a practical way forward to transform that division and society as a whole.

A tradition of using class and labour organization to forge non-sectarian unity exists in Northern Ireland, but Emmett O’Connor illustrates how being pulled in two directions simultaneously immobilized it, “one trying to unite workers around ‘bread and butter’ politics and to avoid divisive issues. The other facing the

constitutional question directly” (O’Connor 1996, 52). I believe, however, that the newest incarnation of Socialist politics has managed to take on both of these challenges. They manage the first with the sort of struggles that Horgan and the SP describe above and with pleas to the working class to be workers before being Unionists or Nationalists. But the critique goes beyond that and hits the heart of the constitutional question. A Socialist Party document demonstrates how any of the potential solutions for the constitutional question under current conditions would be unacceptable:

Socialists are opposed to the constitution in the south, which enshrines Catholic doctrine and the rights of private property. We are against the British constitution with its hereditary monarch. And we are against the constitutional arrangement represented by the agreement because of the way it entrenches sectarianism. (Hadden 2001)

The only solution in Left terms (and perhaps I would go as far to say, the only real solution I have heard proposed) is as Paddy Meehan described “a Socialist Ireland as part of a voluntary federation of socialist England Scotland and Wales” (Meehan). Socialism will challenge the very notion of the nation-state, will challenge what it means to be a citizen of any country, and thus completely changes the terms of the constitutional question.

Carrying this critique further, the Left sees a direct connection between Sectarianism, Sectarian violence and Northern Ireland’s economic system. Alliance and SDLP will talk about how much Sectarian division costs and suggest dismantling it as a budgetary fix, but only the Left platforms go further to encapsulate the hold that this division and violence has over workers. The SWP noted in their



publications in the early 2000s how “War has strengthened the hold of governments over their people” and then went on to quote a traditional Leninist claim that “war is the logical extension of market competition” (SWP 2001). In the context of Northern Ireland and the Troubles it illustrates how a mentality founded in the division and the inter-communal violence of that Sectarianism has only served to solidify governmental power, weaken workers’ movements and quell people’s ability to realize their own change. But instead of blaming the working class, as analysts who see that violence is highest in poorer neighborhoods frequently do, the Left turns it into a critique of the system and structure of society – particularly the capitalist mode of production and the competition that drives it. I heard what I know to be the classic Socialist argument frequently repeated: the capitalists use notions of private property to take more than their fair share, and then divide the working class to fight amongst themselves over the scraps.

The Left would have always been critical of the economic structures of society and the detrimental affects these have on workers and communities, but the recent economic collapse and budgetary cuts have sharpened these critiques. They see the cuts to social services and welfare as asking ordinary people to pay for the crisis that bankers, developers and politicians caused. Richard Boyd Barrett articulated this most clearly in his speech at McCann’s launch:

There is a battle raging across Europe – a debate between people or profit. They try to mystify us with economics, finance, try to obscure what its really about. They bring out experts to say that small minds can’t really understand this stuff. Its an attempt at obfuscation to cloud very simple issues: Whether ordinary people pay – with cut-backs, austerity, forced deportation – or whether bankers and bondholders, or should I say speculators and gamblers

should pay. Someone will, but it's a question of whether it's the people who can afford to because they are still getting rich of the system, or those who have nothing. (Boyd Barrett, PBP Launch)

Following Boyd Barrett, McCann reinforced the notion that these events can and must be challenged arguing that there is nothing natural or inevitable about Capitalism and thus there is no need to carry out these cuts, these austerity plans in its name. The Socialist Party agreed with the PBP politicians in principle, but at their election meeting went further to say that the rallying call to fight the cuts was not enough, "Yes we are the anti-cuts candidates, but we have to convince people that beyond that, that we can actually defeat the cuts and that we are the alternative" (Mulcahy Gary. SP Party Meeting. 11 Apr, 2011). To this end they proposed a massive one-day general strike to prove to the government and financial sector that the worker's would not stand for this and that they would have to find a different way to come up with four billion pounds.

Eamonn McCann cuts through any nuance of the Left platform, simply stating, "The money is there- it's just in the wrong hands" (McCann, PBP Launch). But being able to see that, and being able to do something about it are two very different things. The Left parties have several propositions to right the injustice they see: Closing corporate tax loopholes which allow corporations to avoid paying 100 billion euro in taxes yearly; allowing the banks to collapse and restructuring our management of wealth; the creation of a massive public works project to create countless new jobs. These proposals all seek to use the government and the machinery of the state to take the excess money away from the rich – who hold no legitimate claim to it- and use it to meet the basic needs of everyone.

I do not know if this economic math really adds up. I do not know if you really could sustainably support the working class by redistributing wealth from the rich – I want to believe it, but I can't be sure. Eamonn Smullen declared after the fall of the Soviet Union that "Socialist Economics are dead," and perhaps that is true, perhaps – as some might argue - the lesson of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is really that welfare states and socialized economies cannot succeed (Smullen 1990, 4). But no matter what the ultimate economic solution is, I think that these economic propositions have merit when viewed through the reality of Left politics in today's political field. A time when Leftists have the power to fully dominate economic policy in Northern Ireland (or anywhere for that matter) seems like a very remote possibility; while some like Chairwoman Walker might still see themselves as "working toward that revolution," (Walker) I think one could view the approach of PBP and the Socialist Party as finding a practical way to engage in current debate. By taking an extreme position, highlighting the economic plight of the underprivileged and underrepresented, and articulating the fact that unchecked poverty and sectarian violence are intrinsically linked, they are able to raise an often overlooked perspective in the debate and hopefully draw at least some of the mainstream attention in that direction.

At the core of the Leftist critique of Sectarianism, their economic analysis, and the political tactics they take on both, is an argument that power-sharing and the post-GFA Stormont is an ineffective system. The Socialist Party go as far as to call it "fundamentally undemocratic - no matter what parties people vote for there can only be one government, a unionist/nationalist coalition" (Hadden 2001). This

lack of input from the people, this lack of electoral threat, and the total absence of an opposition, they argue, leads to an intrinsically conservative body that refuses to make meaningful change. Diane Greer, who only joined PBP in the last few years, tells a story of disenchantment with this system and how its stagnation might drive people to the Left “now in our politics we don’t make big decisions quick enough, we don’t take about where we need to go as a society. Don’t have that level of debate. So I guess in the last few years I have become more radicalized” (Greer).

The aspect of the power-sharing system that worries the Left most is the communal veto that allows a party to demand that a vote pass from both the Unionist and Nationalist side if the subject is deemed “Sectarian.” Concentrating power in even fewer hands, this policy has stymied a considerable amount of legislation whose ‘sectarian’ label seemed dubious at best. One example of this, explained by Connor Kelly, regarded a radiation treatment center that was to be built in Derry, “They called the radiation treatment machine here a sectarian issue and that way the DUP was able to vote it down and they can do that with whatever they want.” And its not only the DUP –whom Connor and the Socialists would have a lot of complaints about - that does this, “Even the parties who claim to be socialist [meaning Sinn Fein and the SDLP] don’t do anything. They are all essentially right-wing Thatcherite parties” (Kelly). Eamonn McCann channeled this disgust toward communal politics into a stronger call to shake things up in the 2011 election: Since Sinn Fein would only need three more seats in this election to join the DUP in their ability to win any sectarian vote, he deemed the whole thing, “an appalling political vista” (McCann, PBP Launch).

Hoping to get a contrasting view of this political system I interviewed Conall McDevitt, SDLP MLA from South Belfast and former spokesperson for John Hume while the GFA were being negotiated. He rejected the claim that the system codifies sectarianism, arguing instead that it only does so if people bring those intentions to the table:

I think it acknowledges that we are sectarian but to say it institutionalizes it is to miss the point of reconciliation. It could support sectarianism, but if people come to with transformational politics it doesn't have to. Unfortunately Sinn Fein and the DUP have not come with this attitude.  
(McDevitt)

He does, however, admit that the GFA 'totally changes campaigning' and elections, because you are voting for the strength of the party not on whether it should be in Stormont at all. He argues that this forces parties to be more specific and more in depth with their manifestos and proposals for action because they know that at least some of it will be implemented.

The Left, on the other hand, argue that the way elections and campaigning work under this system allows for too many shared assumptions and allows the ruling parties to define the bounds for action too narrowly. Eamonn McCann and PBP frequently pointed this out regarding labour union laws that have remained unchanged since the 1980s, "these Thatcherite union laws have now been devolved to the Northern Ireland executive yet there has never been one speech on this in the Assembly" (McCann, PBP Launch). It is as if there is an unspoken agreement amongst the ruling parties to never give voice to any ideas, people or policy that might challenge their power or profit-making machinery. And with no opposition,

there is no one to force them to.

This stagnation and telescoped political vision is the key aspect of McCann's campaign and the role he, and perhaps any Left, would play in Stormont. Speaking at the end of McCann's campaign launch, Goretti Horgan urged the crowd, "Eamonn is prickly and clear in his politics, and not all of us agree with him on everything, but can't we agree that he is exactly what Stormont needs – a good opposition" (Horgan, PBP Launch) The Socialist Party, who has lent some reserved support to McCann's campaign, agreed arguing that without opposition "No matter who wins this election the button will be pressed immediately afterward and the four billion pounds in cuts enacted" (Mulcahy, SP Meeting). The only vote against this system, the only people who could be assured to speak out against these cuts and the bounded thinking of the major parties, would be the non-sectarian Left. It is this ability to give voice to ignored perspectives, to challenge the Sectarianism, to rethink the economy, that makes me think that the Left could send a powerful message to Northern Ireland, and why it is so desperately important that they find a way to make people listen.

### **ROUSING THE RABBLE: TURNING IDEAS INTO CHANGE**

As the 2011 Assembly elections enter their final stage- manifestos printed, rallies held, canvasses conducted – the waiting period sets in and the question is left: how successful was the Left at overcoming their image of isolation and convincing people to sign onto their program? While it seems unlikely that the Left will enjoy massive electoral support this time around, some progress does not seem

so inconceivable. In attempting to examine the potential for change and progress on the Left front of politics in Northern Ireland, I have found it useful to conceptualize this project as a form of praxis: an attempt to take theory, mobilize it, and use it to realize social change. Socialism is a theory, the goal of Socialist politics is to serve as a mechanism to bring those ideas into interaction with the world as it is and create change. So when Socialist politics fails to take root the question becomes what has failed, the theory? The mechanism? Or is the environment too strong to change?

I found that the story of women's involvement in Left politics most clearly defines the various aspects of the process I am describing. To begin with some background: Women are underrepresented in Left politics; women are underrepresented in all politics in Northern Ireland. The events I witnessed had somewhere between 10-50% women's participation compared to being 51% of the population. According to Dawn Purvis - who bluntly stated, "Gender is awful here" - women's participation in politics in general in Northern Ireland was a mere 13% (Purvis, Dawn. Personal Interview. 14 Apr. 2011).

Nearly every Left party has something in their platform/ascribed theory about women, women's liberation and women's participation. A Socialist Workers Party document spells out the ways that Socialist quest for equality and the Feminist quest for sexual liberation are inherently entwined. They go on to claim that, between their stances on abortion, equality and liberation, they have the "most radical agenda on women's issues" (SWM 1995). The Socialist party writes in a strategy document that because of women's unique relation to work and the Labour

force, “Women will play a vital role in the rebirth of the working class movement” and thus have to be actively recruited (Hadden 2001).

These parties are by no means perfect on women’s issues and their past and present platforms contain many things that could enrage feminists and women in general. The SWM document continues from the above statement to say that women’s oppression is solely the fault of capitalism and not the fault of men’s interests as a gender and that working class men are not interested in oppressing women and thus, “the feminist strategy of uniting all women against all men is fatally flawed” (SWM 1995). On the Socialist Party side, former British MP David Nellist spoke their campaign launch and implied that the fact that women have started working in the last forty years has shown the further impoverishment of the worker in the capitalist system (Nellist, David. SP Launch). Ideas of these sorts may have some merit, parties could possibly have meaningful debates around them, but I can only imagine that they would alienate potential female supporters.

Then there is the issue of creating a mechanism to operationalize those ideas about women’s participation and advancement. In my time with them, members of both parties expressed their concerns about the level of women’s involvement in their movements and plans to change it. While I was out canvassing with the Socialist Party, Owen explained that they were telling interested women at the doors that if they wanted to attend a meeting one of the already involved women could come and they could carpool so that the whole experience seemed less intimidating (Owen. 12 Apr. 2011). People Before Profit’s issues revolved less



around participation (they generally fair better in that regard) and more about candidates. Diane Greer said she decided to run because she couldn't take the message it would send for PBP to stand four male candidates and no women: "But I said to Goretti, the photographs of the candidates are gonna all be men – we are so big on equality, can we defend this to our feminist friends? She said she wouldn't stand, and I said I wouldn't. But then I thought, well you know something..." (Greer).

Diane Greer ultimately stood for both the socialist cause and the women's cause, but her struggle around this decision highlights some of the social forces working against women's participation. As she explains it, "I thought: I have children, I have a job, I couldn't stand... but then I realized that every woman would say the same thing" (Greer). Women's work life has been described as a 'double-day,' a full day at a job, and then a full day doing work at home; studies I've looked at elsewhere show that this only gets worse as economies collapse and unemployment rises. Add that to the less visible social mores surrounding women in leadership roles, women in politics and women in public and you can begin to see the shear force of what someone like Diane Greer or Dawn Purvis has to overcome when they decide to stand for election.

When I look at the Left's attempts to change the amount of female participation they currently have, I see some progress but obviously not of the scale they or I might desire. The question then is what element falls through? Do the flaws in their feminist theory need reworking? Do they need to develop more significant political mechanisms? Or are the societal forces too strong at the moment and do

they need to be changed? Determining the exact cause would be impossible; however, examining how work could be done on any of these three fronts could illustrate that Leftists are opening room for change and that progress is very possible. I believe that the Left is reflecting on and moving toward new developments on each of these three levels on a number of issues – in this way they may be laying the groundwork for the future of Socialism to be built in Northern Ireland.

Some of the Left's most significant trouble theoretically and ideologically over the past 40 years has centered around getting Protestants involved in the struggle. Both because of the positions they take on the British Empire and the Northern Irish State as well as the key players of the parties who grew out of the Civil Rights Movement, Socialism has traditionally been seen by Protestants as an offshoot of the Republican movement. I heard this when I went out canvassing for the Socialist Party and was warned by Owen, "there is a rumor going around that we are a Republican party, we need to remind them that we are the anti-Sectarian party" (Owen). Dawn Purvis expanded this notion rooting Protestant distrust in its history and the dominant strains of its political thought, claiming there had been little Protestant support "because anything equated with socialism was viewed as Republicanism, so any left-of-centre movement was seen as subversive and anti-state" (Purvis).

Blaming Protestant's confusion or unwillingness to be critical is too simple: one must examine how the Left has made their cause worse over the years with the

rhetoric and arguments they have undertaken. The Socialist Workers Party's publication *Resistance* contained several articles decrying Sectarianism and how it was tearing apart the country - every single one of these articles began with a story of a loyalist attack on Catholics and with statements like "This shows the hatred and bigotry that is at the heart of Loyalism." Other past statements have compared the Protestants to Northern Ireland to the French in Algeria or poor Southern whites, who were irredeemably drawn to their racist ideology through their marginal economic advantage in the way that, "When tuppence half-penny is looking down on tuppence, the half-penny difference can assume an importance out of all proportion to its actual size" (SWM 2001). Even worse, they claimed that unionist identity was created purely to serve the interests of the British and that Protestants were "dupes of the British" who should wake up and shake off that identity to rejoin their Irish brethren. This ideology still exists to some extent and could be heard in Roisin Kelly's comments about Dawn Purvis who, "would be a strong Left voice from the unionist community, but she hasn't joined PBP yet because she isn't ready to give up her allegiance to unionism" (Kelly).

Eamonn Smullen, Robin Wilson and members of the Socialist Party have all discussed how these views that unionists were dupes and victims of alienation from their own interests have ruined any chances the Left has had of building popular support in Protestant communities. But they move on to propose how these ruptures might be repaired, Wilson (most convincingly I think) attempts to reinterpret the needs of Unionists to make them more open to the Left "Socialists could reasonably seek to define unionists desires of anti-clericalism, refusal to

resign social gains and unwilling to be coerced into a united Ireland, in the language of freedom, progress and democracy” (Wilson 1983, 24). Reports from the Unionist community suggest that these types of approaches could be welcomed, Dawn Purvis noted that, “There is a real hunger out there for someone to articulate a left-of-centre, working-class unionist view within the Assembly because it hasn’t been very well articulated in the past” (Purvis 2008). In his examination of the developing community activists in Unionist communities, Cassidy finds that class-consciousness and politics are already working their way into the unionist thought process, “The new loyalist community activists have broken that pattern of acceptance of established institutions and have asserted the class-based outlook evident above and use it to challenge the state” (Cassidy 2008, 425)

But can the Left parties adapt their message to harness this new class energy in Protestant communities? Both the Socialist Party and PBP are actively campaigning and running candidates in Protestant neighborhoods this election. I accompanied the Socialist Party on some of their canvasses in the Laganbank area of Belfast – in a neighborhood with red, white and blue painted curbs and UFF and UDA graffiti – and watched them define themselves as always against the armed Republican struggle, try to meet these people on basic issues of jobs and funding and services that mattered individually to them, and then convince them that the anti-sectarian Socialist Party was the only party truly on their side. I saw the wife of a man in a Rangers (the Scottish Premier Football League team typically supported

by the Northern Irish Unionist community) jersey heartily promise her support; I saw another man in a Rangers jersey slam the door in their face.<sup>7</sup>

People Before Profit has also come out with a document, entitled “A Direct Appeal to Protestant Workers,” trying to put forth a more welcoming message to Protestants. Instead of claiming that Protestants are inherently sectarian or tied to the British Empire, they are moving toward the strategy of meeting them at the level of issues and convincing them that a new politics is needed:

The DUP has dominated the politics of the Protestant people through the lifetime of the last Assembly.. But what have they given in return to the ordinary people who lifted them into power? Next to nothing. I have said and repeat that from the point of view of their working-class constituents, the DUP is useless. A different way forward is needed.

And assuring them that “People Before Profit tries to represent the interests of people in the bottom half of society, irrespective of the community they come from.” They have great hope that this will significantly improve their play in Protestant areas, we will see on Election Day (McCann 2011).

Probably the single biggest question about the operations and mechanisms of the Left, and perhaps the most significant challenge facing them now, regards the notion of Left unity. People frequently use the word “Sectarianism” to describe the situation on the Left, and the irony is not lost on these ‘anti-Sectarian’ parties; talking to members of these parties I was often referred to a quote from Karl Marx saying, “the development of socialist sectarianism and that of the real working class

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<sup>7</sup> This moment was an interesting lesson in sectarian thinking for me. This man could have been having a bad day, he could be a staunch capitalist and disagreeing with the Socialists on the merits of their arguments – but my initial reaction was that this was a man in a Rangers jersey slamming the door on a candidate because he was named Paddy.

movement always stand in reverse ratio to one another” (c.f. SWP 2001) The Left are conscious that their division curbs their progress, and while they talk of change, doing it proves more difficult.

For the 2011 Dáil election in the Republic, the Socialist Party and People Before Profit came together to form the United Left Alliance; they quadrupled their presence in the Dáil in that election. At nearly every event I attended the question was asked, “When will the United Left Alliance happen in the North?” The response from people in both parties invariably was, “Soon, but its difficult, the material conditions are different up here.” To People Before Profit that seemed to mean that the Socialist Party had never considered actually winning before, “They don’t actually plan to win, they don’t have a plan to govern, they just run to stir up socialist support and ideology and to fly the flag of socialism,” and this raised concerns as to whether they had what it took to negotiate the nuances of governing in Northern Ireland (Kelly).

The Socialist Party tended to emphasize ideological differences with the Socialist Workers Party (they always refer to them as that) primarily around what they perceive to be a sectarian past, as Socialist candidate Paddy Meehan described “McCann gave critical support to the PIRA for being anti-imperialist, they do not support the Orange Order’s rights to march in Catholic areas, these are all things we would have issues with him saying if he were elected ... but we would support a ULA if it were federally operated and people respected a democratic mandate” (Meehan). The environment up here, he suggested, is such that just a few choice words could

destroy the whole movement, which is why hammering these things out beforehand is so important. Why they could only join if the alliance allowed for relative ideological autonomy. The Worker's Party and the Communist Party – though they make proclamations about unity – have so far been uninvolved in any of the moves toward a United Left Alliance (see [www.workerspartyireland.net](http://www.workerspartyireland.net)).

Some doubt whether a Left alliance would have any real affect on the voter's perception of the parties in Northern Ireland, Eamonn Smullen argued that, "The public never talk about it. They hate the words 'left unity' almost as much as the words 'armed struggle'" (Smullen 1990, 16). However, I ran into a number of people who cited the Left's disunity as their reason for not supporting or joining it. One of the reasons Dawn Purvis gave for not joining any of the Left parties after leaving the PUP (far from her emotional attachment to Unionism) was, "There are too many left groups and too much infighting between them. A bit like the right wing, they all think they are right, all think they have the best policies, and never get their act together to be a formidable force for change" (Purvis). Beyond gaining new members or supporters, simply stopping competing with each other over the few votes they do get would be a significant help to the Left. In the last election the Workers Party, Socialist Environmentalist Alliance and the Socialist Party – none of whom gained a seat in Stormont - votes combined totaled more than the Progressive Unionist Party's – who did get a seat ([www.ark.ac.uk/elections/](http://www.ark.ac.uk/elections/)). Neither that math nor Dawn Purvis's statement are enough to prove that a United Left Alliance would be met with success, but I think they are enough to raise suspicions that it would make the Left a more formidable force.

Finally, if the theory and the attempts to implement it do not take hold, the parties are left with the option of attempting to alter the social forces that their theory and mobilization come up against. The clearest way the parties do this is through their various issue-based campaigns that take place in conjunction with and apart from their elections. These movements around specific issues – against water charges and tuition raises<sup>8</sup>, for workers’ rights and social services, about gender equality and LGBT rights – not only make material advances in the direction the Left proposes, they also lay the foundations of the consciousness that will turn people towards these parties’ platforms in the future.

The Socialist Party, which fancies itself as the leading party in all of these material campaigns, instructed all of its canvassers to emphasize that these elections were not the end goal, that they were but a stop in a larger process to build a movement opposing the cuts from Stormont and the abandonment of the poor. Gary Mulcahy proclaimed that this strategy would be the key to building Socialist support and possible future success, “Remind people about what we’ve done in the water charges campaign – its not opportunistic or self centered – we have to take credit for that so people know that this is possible. It was a campaign that united the working class and it proved that we could do it” (Mulcahy, SP Meeting). This tactic seemed successful in my experience canvassing: numerous people on the doorsteps would say they had never heard of the Socialist Party but when pressed about the

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<sup>8</sup> Two of the most significant campaigns in recent years: The We Won’t Pay Campaign which successfully stopped the State from imposing an extra utility charge on personal water use; and the student lead protest against recent proposals to raise yearly tuition at Northern Ireland universities to 9,000 pounds a year.



Stop the Cuts Campaign and the We Won't Pay Campaign most remembered them, seemed supportive, and became more interested. People Before Profit (who in my experience focuses less on party building and more on spreading ideas to the most possible people) argued more that these movements taught people the core elements of Socialism and made a significant transformation in consciousness that would lead to further action and support,

A student occupation can allow those involved draw important lessons about the difference between rhetoric and action. Taking part in a rent strike or boycott of water charges can show people the importance of solidarity. Opposing harassment from the RUC the British Army or the Gardai can show how the state really functions despite its pretence at democracy. Campaigning against racism or standing up to the bigots of Irish society who want to deny women's rights can also be an important starting point for seeing why the system as a whole has to be opposed. (SWM 1995, 14)

According to the Socialist/Marxist critique the forces that impede progress in challenging and transforming society are socially constructed and sustained by people's silent assent to them. By engaging more and more people in these struggles around specific issues, that complicit support starts to break down and those forces begin to lose power. Through this strategy the parties seek to create a political field that might be more open to their platforms and organizations in the future. I think this also explains the premium the parties place on engaging youth. A Socialist Party document argues that, "Youth are the most dynamic section of society, those that will most readily draw revolutionary conclusions," that they are the most able to question the society they see, have the most energy in that direction, and will carry the fight into the future (Hadden 2001). This dynamic led Paddy Meehan to state that, "the future will come down to which party can attract the youth," for they are

the ones who will continue to change the structures and lay the groundwork for Socialism (Meehan).

While the impression exists that Left parties simply do the same things over and over again with little to no result, I think that, through closer examination, a more complicated and hopeful picture appears. Understanding Left politics as a form of praxis - as the process of making social change through implementing theory - and seeing that change has failed to come, one must conclude that they have to either change the theory, change the implementation or find ways to make that society more receptive. By looking at the theoretical revisions around Protestant involvement in Socialism, the debates about forming a unified Left force, and the struggles to make material changes in society now, it becomes evident that the Left parties are working on all three fronts to make a stronger impact. While it is difficult now to know how well any of these initiatives will work, it at least opens up the potential for progress in the Left project in Northern Ireland.

### **CONCLUSION**

I arrived in Ireland impressed by a Left that was taken more seriously, had more of a fighting chance, than I had ever seen in the United States. I quickly came to see that the Left here is hampered by the same things they are in the States (and maybe everywhere): an image of disconnect from real people; a history of destructive infighting; and relative political isolation and powerlessness. However my experience studying them in the 2011 Assembly election forced me to rethink that conclusion.

My time with these parties and on these campaigns was a roller coaster of contrasting experiences and reactions. There were moments at rallies and on doorsteps when real people seemed to connect to the party platforms, seemed moved by them, inspired and committed; there were moments in backroom meetings of party diehards where it became apparent that signing up twenty new party-members in the coming weeks would be considered an electoral success. I am still left with a profound uncertainty about the purpose, methods and future of these parties, and how I would – outside of a three-week research project – chose to relate to them.

These parties do have important things to say about Northern Ireland though. The 2011 elections, as marking the end of the first completed term of the power-sharing assembly, were roundly celebrated as a marker of Northern Ireland's newfound peace and stability. The Left critique that this "peace" is built on partnership at the top and enshrined division on the bottom, the continued impoverishment of the working classes, and a political stagnation and narrow focus that prevents meaningful change and action, needs to be heard. To borrow Marx's (and originally Hegel's) own conception of how societies change, if someone doesn't articulate an alternative vision for society there is no hope for progress or change. That, I believe, is the Left's role in Northern Ireland.

Whether voters and politicians will give their proposals enough credence to allow them to have this affect is still a debate. History does not look good for the Left in the North: they have never been particularly successful at garnering a significant

following here. But looking at the theories and tactics they are currently undertaking, these parties are in a stage of revision and change, with new and different theories, changes to their political structure, and committed action within the communities. One could reasonably hope that through this the Left may find a new ability to realize a Socialist praxis in Northern Ireland.

The elections on May 5<sup>th</sup> could mark a turn in the course of Left politics here, but it very well could be too soon to tell – countless questions remain. If Eamonn McCann wins a seat, what exactly will that mean for Stormont and the Left? Can the Socialist Party and its allies build enough of a grassroots campaign to have any affect on the cuts coming through? As these cuts happen will there be a new generation of radicalized people? Can these parties unite and would a United Left Alliance make them more formidable? My paper has attempted to be a snapshot of these processes and ideas and how they are focused into the 2011 Assembly elections, as these things develop the Left in Northern Ireland will hopefully continue to be fruitful ground for analyzing potential directions for politics and Northern Ireland as a whole.

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## **APPENDIX**

### **NORTHERN IRELAND ELECTION RESULTS 2003-2010 for Left Parties**

[www.ark.ac.uk/elections/](http://www.ark.ac.uk/elections/)

#### **2010 - Westminster Elections -**

##### **Foyle (SDLP)**

PBP Eamonn McCann – 2,936 (7.6 %)

#### **2007 Stormont Election -**

##### **Foyle (Seats won: 3 SDLP, 2 SF, 1 DUP)**

SEA: McCann, Eamonn 2,045 (5.0%)

##### **Belfast East ( 3 DUP, 2 UUP, 1 AL, 1 PUP)**

Workers Party: Bell, Joseph 107 (0.4%)

Socialist Party (Northern Ireland): Black, Thomas 225 0(.8%)

##### **Belfast South (2 SDLP, 1 DUP, 1 UUP, 1 Alliance, 1 SF)**

Socialist Party (Northern Ireland): Barbour, James 248 (0.8%)

Workers Party: Lynn ,Patrick 123 (0.4%)

##### **Belfast West (5 SF, 1 SDLP)**

Workers Party: Lowry, John 434 (1.3%)

People Before Profit Alliance: Mitchell, Sean 774 (2.3%)

##### **Belfast North (2 DUP, 2 SF, 1 SDLP, 1 UUP)**

Workers Party: Lavery, John 139 (0.5%)

##### **Lagan Valley (3 DUP, 1 UUP, 1 SF, 1 Alliance)**

Workers Party: Magee, John 83 (0.2%)

##### **South Antrim (2 DUP, 1 UUP, 1 SF, 1 Alliance, 1 SDLP)**

Workers Party: Delaney, Marcella 89 (0.2%)

#### **2005 Westminster Elections -**

##### **Foyle (SDLP)**

SEA- Eamonn McCann 1649 (3.6%)

**North Belfast (DUP)**

WP – Marcella Delaney 165 (.5%)

**West Belfast (SF)**

WP: John Lowry 432 (1.3% -0.5%)

**South Belfast (SDLP)**

WP: Patrick Joseph Lynn 193 (0.6% +0.1%)

**East Belfast (DUP)**

WP: Joe Bell 179 (0.6% +0.3%)

**Upper Bann (DUP)**

WP: Tom French 355 (0.8% -0.2%)

**Mid Ulster (SF)**

WP: Francis Donnelly 345 (0.8% -0.2%)

**2005 Local Elections –**

**Derry**

**Cityside (3 SF, 2 SDLP)**

SEA: Liam Friel, 182

**Waterside (3 DUP, 2 SDLP, 1 SF, 1 UUP)**

SEA: David McAuley, 194

**Rural (3 SDLP, 2 DUP, 1 SF)**

SEA: Eamonn McCann 371

**Northland (4 SDLP, 3 SF)**

SEA: Colm Bryce, 353

SEA: Oisín Kehoe, 221

**Belfast**

**Pottinger (3 DUP, 1 UUP, 1 PUP, 1 Alliance)**

Socialist Party: Thomas Black 163



WP: Joseph Bell 105

**Castle (DUP 2, SDLP 2, SF 1, UUP 1)**

WP: John Lavery, 112

**Old Parl (SF 3, DUP 1, SDLP 1, UUP 1)**

WP: Paul Treanor, 60

**Lagan Bank (2 SDLP, 1 UUP, 1 SF, 1 DUP)**

Socialist Party: James Barbour, 175

WP: Patrick Lynn, 107

**Lower Falls (SF 5)**

WP: John Lowry, 314

**Craigovan**

**Craigovan Central (2 UUP, 2 DUP, 1 SF, 2 SDLP)**

WP: Tom French 132

**Loughside (3 SF, 2 SDLP)**

WP: Tom French, 155

**Down**

**Downpatrick (SDLP 4, SF 3, Green 1)**

WP: Desmond O'Hagan, 97

**Fermanagh**

**Enniskillen ( 2 SF, 2 DUP, 1 UUP, 2 SDLP)**

SP: Paul Dale 406

**Magherafelt**

**Sperrin (3 SF, 1 SDLP, 1 DUP)**

WP: Francis Donnelly, 102

Assembly 2003 –

**Foyle (SDLP 3, DUP 1, SF 2)**

SEA: Eamonn McCann 2257 (5.5%)

**East Belfast (2 DUP, 2 UUP, 1 PUP, 1 Alliance)**

Soc: Thomas Black 176 (0.6%)

WP: Joseph Bell 125 (0.4%)

**North Belfast ( 2 DUP, 2 SF, 1 UUP, 1 SDLP)**

WP: Marcella Delaney 90 (0.3%)

**South Belfast (2 UUP, 2 SDLP, 1 DUP, 1 SF)**

Soc: James Barbour 167 (0.5%)

WP: Patrick Lynn 96 (0.3%)

**West Belfast (4 SF, 1 SDLP, 1 DUP)**

WP: John Lowry 407 (1.2%)

**South Down (2 SDLP, 2 SF, 1 UUP, 1 DUP)**

WP: Desmond O'Hagan 115 (0.3%)

**Lagan Valley (3 UUP, 1 DUP, 1 Alliance, 1 SDLP)**

WP: Frances McCarthy 97 (0.2%)

**East Londonderry (2 DUP, 2 UUP, 1 SF, 1 SDLP)**

SEA: Marion Baur 137 (0.4%)

**Mid Ulster**

WP: Francis Donnelly 230 (0.5%)

**Newry and Armagh (3 SF, 1 SDLP, 1 DUP, 1 UUP)**

WP: Freda Donnelly 474 (1.0%)

**Upper Bann (2 UUP, 2 DUP, 1 SF, 1 SDLP)**

WP: Tom French 247 (0.6%)

## **Connor Kelly and Roisin Kelly**

People Before Profit candidate and office manager, PBP Office April 4, 1130-1200

(Fairly empty storefront. Bookstore selling books from a People's history, to Malcolm X, to copies of Marx and Engels, and pamphlets on the north. A few tables. No. A few old tables and chairs (one looks like it was stolen from the other coffee store). Jeans, leggings, casual. Literature and Posters everywhere. Trouble with old technology.)

CK: I am a candidate; I am running for Derry City Council from the Cityside (Bogside and Creggan and Brandywell estates) so I guess you can say that I work here. I was involved in SEA and SWP until they merged into PBP and that is what I'm doing now. SEA was only Northern Ireland, so it helps to be in PBP and have that support from the entire island. People Before Profit Alliance (started in the North in 2009) is not really a political party; we register as one because we have to stand in elections. We are not a Socialist or Revolutionary organization. We have many members who are socialist and even revolutionary socialists but as an organization that is not our official approach. We try to have the broadest possible base to appeal to.

CK: We believe that socialism is the only answer to the sectarianism in Ireland. We must unite as working class to fight ... that identity is more important than others. I don't like referring to the "unionist community." The Peace Process has institutionalized sectarianism and division and we will never get anything done with it enshrined at the core of our political system. Someone might want to maintain a union with Britain and see that as an ultimate goal, but it might not be the priority at the top of their agenda. At the same time, someone might want to see a united 32 county republic in Ireland, but it might not be their first priority. The goal then is to see where they can agree and where they can work together, and that always happens along class issues.

There was a woman who had been in the UDA and she was listening to Bernadette Devlin, and she didn't want to like what BD said, because she was a staunch unionist and thought of BD as a vehement Republican, but she realized that she agreed to much with what she was saying to ignore her.

Our support has traditionally been in the Catholic community, but we are making significant inroads into the Protestant communities and we should see much bigger turnout there this year. We are the only leftist org that campaigns in the Protestant communities. Our candidates in Derry are about half and half; we have two candidates from the Waterside who are from the Protestant/loyalist community. Two from the Cityside from the Catholic community and Eamon. We are all running, but our main goal is to get Eamon elected. He has the biggest name and sending him to Stormont would signal a mass change in the sectarian politics of Northern Ireland where you have to register as Nationalist, Unionist or Neither. And no one registers as neither.

Me: what about Alliance?

CK: Alliance registers as unionist I think. Even if they don't actually register as unionist. They take a passive, backseat role; they voted for the budget, they don't seriously challenge the sectarian nature of politics.

R: Dawn Purivs tried. She would be a strong leftist voice from the unionist community, but she hasn't joined PBP yet because she isn't ready to give up her allegiance to unionism. But she done good work, she pushed through the double-jobs rule that stopped politicians from serving in multiple bodies at the same time.

CK: But none of the major parties really do anything for the working people. They called the radiation treatment machine here a sectarian issue and that way the DUP was able to vote it down and they can do that with whatever they want. Even the parties who claim to be socialist don't do anything. They are all essentially right-wing Thatcherite parties. We still have these Thatcherite Labour policies in place that curtail the ability for unions to act.

R: No general strikes, only about specific issues and only part of the union at a time. No picket line with more than 6 people.

CK: And these powers were devolved to Stormont in the Peace Process, and none of the major parties (even the supposedly socialist ones) have said anything. About changing this.

R: They wanted to pass a public assemblies law that would make all assemblies have to be preapproved. It would make our assembly on Wednesday illegal, and seriously curtail our ability to have spontaneous rallies. But we spoke out and the bill didn't pass, example of the mobilization of the people.

Me: you say you are the only viable leftist alternative, what about the Socialist Party?

CK: Well the Socialist Party mainly runs to fly the flag, do you know what I mean?

Me: Not really?

CK: They don't actually plan to win, they don't have a plan to govern, they just run to stir up socialist support and ideology and to fly the flag of socialism.

R: But they are apart of the ULA with us in the South and we are working on trying to get that base up here. Its just a matter of hammering things out because material conditions are different up here.

CK: And they recognize the importance of Eamonn's campaign and of Eamonn winning. They want to see him win, that's why they haven't run a candidate in this district.

## **Dermie McLenaghan**

April 5th 230pm St. Columb's Park House

To a group of students from Westminster University taught by his brother-in-law.

DM: I was born in the Bogside although back then it wasn't known as that yet, it was known simply as down-the-bog because of course 100s of years ago the river used to flow through it, so it was then a bog.

7 Wellington St. Working class area, my father was a cattle driver, he had TB, and there was a cure long before that but his health had gone long before. Died of TB, well no TB, but you can die of TB now these days too. We would have rats periodically running through the house and everything... looking back on it was pretty bad objectively speaking. Although we didn't; really perceived as that.

We were politically discriminated against as Catholics, Republicans, Working Class – the Working Class is always discriminated against, the only difference between Protestant and Catholics is their relationship to the state.

We were on the Housing List for 18 years, we never had the chance of getting a house because it would have interfered with the gerrymandering of the Unionist Government. I didn't really understand politics growing up, my father was Republican but not super involved, was in a union, but didn't discuss it around the dinner table.

At the time a man named Dr. Abernathy decided who got houses in Derry, he was a Unionist and he was in charge of the local Apprentice Boys. He was the first person at my father's wake, he sat and had the customary tea and biscuit, and I remember when he left we followed him to the door as you did in those days. I remember him saying to my mother, "Mrs. McLenaghan, I will not be long in getting you a house now." And I remember her responding, "But its too late, he's already dead."

That's when I became political, not when I read Marx, I didn't understand Marx then, I still don't think I completely understand Marx. I was in the Londonderry Labour Party. I wasn't brought up to think about the difference between in Protestants and Catholics, but still aware that Catholics were discriminated against because to give them rights would weaken the state, which was still flimsy.

So then I would have been squatting people into houses. I had my own housing list. It was a political decision not to build houses. There were actually plans to redevelop the Bogside in a way not to extend boundaries – hi flats, build up not out, in Brandywell and Creggan too. Those never got made, but I can show you the plans in boxes in my house. People told me that it was not fair, that it was queue jumping, but no housing was ever rebuilt, so I have no problems. I used to have a

whole team, a plumber, a carpenter, an electrician, and we would fix up empty flats and then move a family in.

One time there was this real nice flat that was empty and we had a family to move into it. And I got there, and it was still warm but the wall-paper was torn up and old looking, so I felt a little uncomfortable but moved them in anyway. Later that night there was a knock on my door and it was John and Pat Hume, and John explained that I had moved the family into Pat's parents flat while they were out of town waiting for it to be refurbished. So I apologized and found the family a different flat.

So we protested against danger in housing and the lack of safety regulations – blocked a street, got some publicity – made a little disruption. Got a caravan put that across the road, police come, people got energized, seemed important. National courage. Radicalized people. Felt better actually doing something, actually involved, felt better than just talking about it. Labour party and DHAC and UHAC caused major disruptions and provided an alternative to Constitutionalism. This was not a socialist move, not motivated by that, more of Radical Social Work.

Once we moved a group of poor families into the mayor's office in Guild hall, there were skirmishes with the police – went with Eamonn McCann and Eamonn Mclough – decided to get in touch with NICRA. So on the 5<sup>th</sup> of October we had the Duke st. March. Wanted the repeal of the Special Powers act. I was the one who decided to have the march on Waterside, otherwise it would be just those surly Catholics marching – it was meant to get the Working Class Protestant. The 1<sup>st</sup> principle to having it on the Waterside was to show it was a working class community as a whole.

Prof “You weren't trying to be deliberately inflammatory?”

No, it was for unity, not parochial. We had every right to march there. I knew absolutely that it was to disrupt politics – but I won't take responsibility for what happened, that is for the State.

“So you admit that it was a bit about showing off and making a disruption.”

Students are the transients of politics.

“But I have heard reports of students seig heiling to police officers and such”

You don't think that is reasonable behavior The police are very provocative, that action was appropriate. I knew it was gonna cause trouble, but what else were we gonna do. – you have to fight back for human dignity.

So PD marched – I thought they were foolish people... they would sit in a circle and mutter, like, lets go occupy the guild hall, then they'd do it and come back and be like, ya ya ya we occupied the guild hall... Benny Hill Comedy show. I didn't agree with that March (the long march from Belfast to Derry) They were going

through every Protestant lawn on the way, left people no choice but to get violent. But still the blame is on the RUC who didn't do anything. So at the next meeting the reins were taken away from the Radicals.

There was lots of trouble then on August the 12, there were people stationed at all the entrances to the Bogside making sure there was no trouble while they marched by. I looked around a corner and a policeman said to me "Get your head round the corner you Fenian Bastard" So I threw a stone at him, aye, I started the troubles. Eamonn McCann runs shouting at me, "I'll condemn you from every socialist platform in the country" I just responded "ah fuck you McCann." And if that's a comment on my politics, crucify me.

The Bogside Seige started then. The Republican movement hadn't really re-emerged at that point but it was always there about an inch under anything that was happening. Everyone knew Gerry the Bird, the gentle Republican who was arrested constantly and broke out of every prison in Ireland, RC would say the bird has flown cause that's what he wrote on the wall before he escaped. Republicans always felt a sort of moral superiority to everyone.

On the DHAC organization committee was me and Eamonn McCann, we weren't Republicans. Then there was Finbar O'Doherty he was a member of the James Connolly club, maybe the only member. Johnny White was, but he was a socialist. Republicanisms was in complete disarray, no coherence. But history made sure it could clamp together. It was involved in that atomistic style.

I never could have envisaged what this would become, but I should have. I would have done a lot of things different. But I wouldn't regret anything in a major profound way. Of course I am sorry about what happened, but I can't take responsibility for it - It's the British Governments fault for they sat back and did nothing about it - no excuse. They knew what was going and did nothing until 1969 and then didn't do the right thing, they have to take responsibility for all these deaths.

(Afterward we meet Terry and Don, who Dermie explains to me had been field commanders for the OIRA back in the 1960s, afterward we all went to Sandino's for a pint - they spent a few hours reminiscing about the past, their friendships, girls they had chased, unfortunately I could not record it and have only remembered these parts exactly).

DM : Ay Terry, you probably would have tried to blow this place up wouldn't you...

Terry: ah not this one.

DM: My Brother In-Law tried to ask me questions to get me angry, but I like it, I don't mean to sound all ego-central, but there is nothing he can ask me that I won't be able to answer. Besides he is about 60 goose-steps to the right of Hitler.

DM: So Terry, Don, are you guys coming to Eamonn's meeting?

Terry: No, Why would I vote for the Socialists? What do they know? They never even leave Sandino's!

DM: Eamonn hardly ever comes here anymore, I might be here, some of us are here a lot, but Eamonn is serious.

## **Eamonn McCann**

People Before Profit Foyle Candidate 7 April, 10:15 am, Café Del Mondo (the PBP office is still out of commission due to electric leak/flood)

I EM: So what do you want to know.

Me: well, I guess a lot of things, everything. Lets start with, I've done some background research and you seem to have been a part of several different Socialist organizations over your time, is that due to changes in Ideology or just organizations.

EM: No. I wouldn't say that it has been a change in direction or a change in ideas, it has been a change of context. The Labour Party 40 years ago was the center of Left Wing thought in Derry, so I joined it. I never left anything over ideology. It has just been a matter of what has made most sense for that context and time.

Me: So what do you think about the various schisms and differences between the Leftist parties today?

EM: Well for instance there is the Communist Party of Ireland which has been involved in things in various ways for years. Now I would disagree with the CPI profoundly over different things, primarily with regard to the USSR, Cuba and China and the other supposedly Socialist countries, that I didn't see as particularly Socialist. They justify the loss of individual freedom for the sake of the stability of the Communist state, which is something I could never accept. The Worker's Party, which was the split off of the Leftist segment of the Republican movement, were also wholly uncritical of the Soviet Union.

It's the problem with being a small Marxist sect – and to some extent that's what we are, but we're working on it. You can't just stand on the fringe shouting about revolution, you need to join and campaign for real issues not enough to just yell revolutionary slogans.

Me: What about the Socialist Party, how do they fit into this?

EM: I mainly disagree with the Socialist Party over how they estimated Stalinist countries, we are both together in a broadly speaking sense a part of Trotskyism – they defined Russia as a Worker's State, whereas the SWP and I see that the state had taken control of the means of production and created another form of State-capitalism. Unfortunately ideological differences have a history of



becoming sharply defined on the left. I don't see any reason why we should be separated – we agree on 90% - creating a division because of the remaining 10% seems plain silly. But it goes back to the nights when we'd stay up all night debating the Maoist movements in Indonesia, how Sukarno claimed there had to be a bloc of the four classes and etc. etc --- It becomes a caricature of itself. I have no time for it anymore, no time at all. If we agree on the essentials, we should just work together.

Me: It seems like Socialism has more support in the Catholic/Nationalist communities than the Prot/Unionist, is that true?

EM: There is no question about that, unionists have been traditionally right wing and traditionally loyal to the state. Unionism is inherently attracted to the status quo. Whereas the nationalist community, being typically against the state, has been more open to radical ideas – to the left.

But class politics has always been hard here because you have essentially two different class structures, that is very different than most places. Unionists have always had a middle class, a managerial class and an industrial class dating back from the days when they owned the shipyards and the linen industry. There has never been that equivalent on the other side. There has also always been a quite structured Working Class, but people knew their place.

The Catholic community had a much greater sense of being one together. There is a unique form of alienation and discontent that comes from being looked down on by your own. Growing up here in the Bogside I was never aware of a layer of Catholics who considered themselves better than me, individuals existed, but never a whole group. I think that knowledge has been greatly to the detriment of the Protestant working people. All advantage accorded to them by their community is gone now, what are they left with? And yet this turns them to the Right wing and an angry source of deep alienation, it distorts our politics.

Its incredibly difficult to get an argument about class going – this all makes people cling even more deeply to the symbols of nationhood and monarchy. They have nothing to thank the state for, but this reverence deepens and intensifies as it becomes only symbols. It's amazing how as they lose substance people cling to the symbols even more. Its part of the context in the right wing.

Me: Buy you are trying to fight this, you have been canvassing in protestant communities.

EM: yes we are canvassing and running candidates and campaigning in all areas, you have to break this down at some point, you have to start. And now the time is right.

Me: why now specifically?

EM: Because the major forms of communal politics, the Unionism and Nationalism has failed. Nationalism hasn't brought about a united Ireland and

doesn't look like it will anytime soon, and unionism fought for years – the likes of Ian Paisley and such – saying they would never share power with Catholics and republicans and of course they lost that battle. Because of that failure neither segment can make it on their own. These have ceased to be Northern Ireland issues, they are global questions about recession and cuts to social spending there is not a specter of religious difference in them. And as not an economist around – left, right or center – thinks that this is getting better any time soon, we need to work together, one group can't advance themselves alone. 40 years ago it might have made sense to talk about making a fairer city an fairer society between Catholics and Protestants, but that just doesn't make sense anymore. Universal cuts came down last week, Characteristically this should provide better terrain for us.

Me: why do you think the terrain might not be as good as it should be?

EM: Tradition weighs very heavily to a greater extent than we allowed for before. Marx has a line about it, what is it, something about the “relative Autonomy of Ideology” I forget where that comes from, but it refers to how ideology seems to continue even after the material basis has disappeared.

This is definitely true of Ulster Unionism. There is no separate nature of Northern Ireland Bourgeoisie, this whole notion of a Protestant elite that is the back bone of Ulster, that's all gone.

But its also true of Republicanism – which has always been the traditional Philosophy around the Catholic community, deserting the nationalism feels like betrayal. There are two separate things going on, they can see that the approach of Working Class politics makes sense, but the Community tugs people back all the time.

Me: You've written that the problem with armed struggles like the IRA is that they are not beholden to the people, how do you work to be a group that despite being small and isolated is more true to the will and needs of the people?

EM: By being involved in broad struggles over specific issues: campaign against the closing of a recycling center, against water charges, militarism, campaigns for jobs and stuff like that, we try to get involved. Believe in that aim to get themselves immersed in these issues. It means working with organizations we don't necessarily fully agree with, some fairly moderate well-meaning people, but its what we have to do.

There is an old traditional aspect of Socialist Revolution that is just waving the flag of bringing on revolution, without doing anything, its futile, the best way is to actually be involved.

Me: I read an article you wrote in which you say Enda Kenny is weak and not going anywhere, what do you think changed to make that happen?

EM: I do think Enda is a lightweight and a fool, 10 months before he became Taoiseach, his own party tried to vote him out because they thought he was worthless. You could have run a pig's bladder on a stick against Fianna Fail this year and they would have one. I am very skeptical about elections, you see it all over the world, you elect radical people and they do not deliver on what they promised, because they promised things that were impossible in the system. That is the communist experience of electoral politics, draw on the desire for radical alternatives and for change, but then get in there and start to conform. There has never been a Leftist politician who has been elected and not accused of selling out.

The only way to keep you honest is to have mobilization of the people from below – you need the masses from below to help you. If they are uninvolved after the election you can't deliver. This has clearly been the Obama experience in the states, people went away, said our job is done, we got our man in there, and now he isn't able to deliver on what he promised, its true everywhere.

Me: So what would you do to try and be different? To keep them mobilized?

EM: I would continue to do what I think PBP has done all along: motivate people around specific issues. There is a huge housing problem in Derry, people having foreclosed mortgages, forced evictions. We would just say no! We'd tell the families, "don't get out of the house." And we would get neighbors in the area to come out and support them. As an MLA I could have more of a hand in organizing that and getting it coverage, saying you would have to arrest us. And I could use my influence and connections to get others involved.

In this way people can be mobilized in large numbers, not through a broad sense of preaching and ideology, but in individual instances that spark this type of action. I've learned through the Trade Union movement that time is impossible, people are either lazy or always busy, but one instance like that can spark it. And they come from unexpected people, its not a matter of a megaphone or a factory, it has to be about a specific meaningful issue. With the recession that is here and coming – there's going to be a lot of flammable material that could ignite easily. A Socialist Organization has to be aware and already involved and relevant to use these opportunities when they arise to mobilize people.

Me: You mentioned the Trade Unions briefly, how much support do you have from them, how much of a connection?

EM: The Trade Unions pay attention to the fact that they have essentially two separate movements and to the segregated nature of the country you could have two separate branches of the same union, one Catholic and one Protestant. And 90% of the time it doesn't matter, most trade union work is not about the communal divide, but it can hold trade unions back. It has tended to result in conservatism in the movement, they are not able to make any radical move because they don't want to alienate anyway. But at the same time there are a quarter of a million trade union members in Northern Ireland, one of the highest in Europe. And they say essentially

the same thing as People Before Profit, that the difference between Orange and Green shouldn't matter – so we harmonize with their fundamental basis, but we haven't won their full support.

Me: Now I noticed the sign over their that says “in memory of all those killed by weapons systems produced in this city and district” and I'm incredibly intrigued – I don't think I've ever seen a sign like that before, did you have anything to do with it?

EM: The sign was put up as a result of our campaign against Raytheon. It was one of the great ironies when Raytheon came here in 1999 as a part of the Peace Process – because of the Peace Dividend that we had been promised. It was hailed as a result of the great things that happen when you give up violence in favor of peace and stability, a company like Raytheon comes in and builds a factor. It was just too obvious. So a campaign started which I was a part of.

We start out primarily with lobbying and marching and the like, but then we occupied the Raytheon plant 3 times. The first was during the Israeli conflict in Southern Lebanon. They were using Raytheon made bombs and there was a bombing of an apartment building on August 9<sup>th</sup> which as the anniversary of the bombing of Nagasaki. So we occupied the building, threw their computers smashed things up pretty bad. So we were all arrested, charged and acquitted. We argued that we weren't committing a crime we were stopping a greater crime from being committed. Raytheon was very unhappy. Then in January of 2009 Raytheon products were used in Operation Cast Lead. So 9 women occupied them again, they were arrested charged and acquitted. We've seen internal documents between Raytheon and the DCC saying that if this type of thing continues they won't be able to stay here, and then they finally left. The plaque is entirely unofficial, no one has dared take it down because they know it would be put back up, so they let it sit there.

Me: Now I have read that you have been criticized for not making an all out renunciation of violence...

EM: Yes. I cringe when people talk about, say what happened in Omagh last weekend and say this was done be men of violence and in general that it was men of violence who killed in the troubles. The loudest condemnations of paramilitary violence often come from the loudest supporters of official violence – same people who say violence is never justified by we stand by our troops. So I get criticized because they say you are less than 100% in your condemnation of the paramilitaries. That is not true, I don't support the paramilitaries and I never have – but I cant take the hypocrisy of it. States carry out wholesale violence, terrorists carry out retail violence.

## **Diane Greer**

People Before Profit Derry Rural Candidate 7 April 200pm, Café Nervosa-

DG: I came to running for office rather reluctantly, as I explained the other night my parents were in business and we were fairly well off. My mother personified that much more than my father. He passed on two years ago and I miss him terribly, mainly around political discussions like this. Like I explained the other night he raised me to think about the coat thing, and everything just flowed from that. Everything was guided by that drive for equality and fair play.

I really had no axe to grind at the wealthy until about the last four or five years – unlike Eamonn and some of the others, I didn't have the fury until recently.

When I was young I supported the paramilitaries, the UDA mainly, it was where my friends were, it was what we did. It was all totally covert behind my parents back, they were well off enough not to be driven to support them like that. But I collected money for prisoners, smuggled things in and out of prisons – notes food, Christmas presents clothes. Wrote letters to prisoners, that was a big thing for young women to do in those days. My friends were all in the a flute band that was connected to the UDA, that's how we got involved. It was a peer group, we believed that we were defending Ulster.

Me: so what changed in the last 4 or 5 years?

DG: I would have always been somewhat outspoken on those issues, but now I'm very clear. I've watched lack of support for people, my son runs a small business, and I've watched the lack of support for small businesses and huge support for multinationals. I know people slipping into the disadvantaged category and hear about bankers bonuses rising, and everything just unraveled. Such fury. I didn't know what to do.

Before now I often got a platform on the radio and in various media forms to express myself. And it was so clear that we were really in crisis. Some people – the bankers the politicians - were making mistakes and then blaming us for it. I watch politics all over the world, in Europe, the middle east and in the states. So I listened to PBP in the South on youtube, ah modern technology, I'm not great at it, but its amazing how it has let me connect to things. I am a simple person who likes things to be set out plainly before me, PBP cut away all the shit, said who it was who was causing this and how we could change it. So at first I liked their message, and then I learned that I really liked the characters.

I was one of the founders of the Women's Coalition, and we worked very hard to get a system in place, but it doesn't work. I still maintain that we needed it then to get beyond where we were, but now in our politics we don't make big decisions quick enough, we don't take about where we need to go as a society. Don't have that level of debate. So I guess in the last few years I have become more radicalized. I have been at varying levels of the left, but I've always been floating about – I think people need to be flexible, if you are uncritically set in your ways you are no better than those on the right. I understand Marxism in bits and babs, but its more the beginners guide to Marxism – not steeped in it like Eamonn. But I'm ok, I

don't have time for that. There are people who have to be able to spend all night debating various aspects of Marxist theory, that's not my thing.

So I got involved/interested when it was still the SEA. I am an environmentalist, I have a bio-diverse garden and hens. And Marrying it with socialism just seemed to make sense to me. And then it morphed into PBP which seemed like a natural progression.

This was going on at the same time as Raytheon, and I was involved in that. But there were Dissident Republicans there too, and because of my background I was finding it harder and harder to be their with them – whether they were defining themselves as anti-war or not. I kept saying to Eamonn, “Eamonn how do you square with that?” So I just quietly moved off the scene.

In People Before Profit I have met some fabulous people and some absolute head-cases. But I relish the vibrancy and the urgency. I like the conversation. I train people in leadership, negotiation and conflict management. I think chaos is a really important aspect of any organization because it gives us so many opportunities to grow and to work.

I think that the Protestant perspective on PBP right now is mainly, Jesus, I'm so angry too, this is what I'm thinking too. I think loads of Protestants will vote for Eamonn this time, but some won't just because its Eamon and he was energized out of the Civil Rights Movement and the same people who led that became the leaders of the IRA, that isn't true, but its what they all think. But for me its not bad, because of the work I do I have had safe passage by the Provos for years, and I have really good relationships across the borders.

My fellow Loyalists used to see me as a traitor for cooperating and working across lines but people don't that anymore. It's a good thing, Protestants traditionally have not been involved in community development in the same way that Catholics have – though in my mind it has been more sustained where it has taken root in the Protestant communities.

If you step outside the lines of these communities you are seen as a threat and it can be very difficult to keep going. The day that Stormont went up after the GFAs, Martin McGuinness was taking questions and I was invited to ask him one and on stage he said that I was very supportive of Republicans who moved away from violence when it was not safe to be. I can't really remember how unsafe it was, but I've gotten tones of death threats, some of them real, some just from some idiot. More often than not from my own community. I could paper the walls with the death threats I've gotten; I think a lot of us could.

Socialism is still very much seen as outside the bounds of the Protestant community, there is a job to be done to get them on board, but slowly people are linking to specific issues and not caring who leads the march. But there is a tradition in Protestant community of acceptance and loyalty to the state, and if not that then an understanding that the state is too big to change, or at the very least that we

don't have the skills or the words or arguments to change it. Literacy levels in the Protestant community are plummeting, self esteem and confidence are plummeting. They are begging to look for things to be proud of, a culture a tradition, and its coming out as Ulster Scots but its still coming. Here in Derry they are getting involved in the arts scene and music for the first time. The arts scene was always seen as part of the Nationalist community, but now where they only used to play in flute bands, they are learning guitar and drums and others.

Yeah there are a lot of artists in the Socialist movement in Derry, it is a defiant and socialist art, we have no bother getting a benefit concert together.

I was involved in the founding of the Women's Coalition, for the Women's EU platform. We new that the parties had women in them who were qualified and ready and we wrote to them asking them to consider putting them higher up near the top of their lists. And to say that if they have no women ready then they should put more resources there. No one got back to us, not even Sinn Fein, which surprised us because we knew they had women councilors. But we asked them and they said, "we don't make the decisions." And someone from Britain looked at our project and said, why don't you start your own party and do it yourselves. And I thought, I wouldn't stand, I have children and I'm doing all this stuff. But then I realized that every woman would say the same thing. So I said count me in for one meeting to look at this. And I was so excited that I went to another. It turned out that as long as we got 100 women to stand and they each got 100 votes, we would get a seat at the GFA table. We only got 70 women, so the number we needed went up, but it worked, we got in and the number of women in politics went up. It has gone back again.

In south there were more women in PBP – when we did initial troll for Eamon for assembly, Colm and Connor said that they wanted to run for Councilors. Now I have never been discriminated against in my life, never disadvantaged. But I said to Goretti, the photographs of the candidates are gonna all be men – we are so big on equality, can we defend this to our feminist friends? She said she wouldn't stand, and I said I wouldn't. But then I thought, well you know something, everything is lining up for me right now in the universe (I can see Eamonn rolling his eyes at this), now is the time. We said we weren't running paper candidates, so I had to be serious about winning. Eamonn rang Roisin, and I was there, he was downhearted because we couldn't find a woman, who would bit the bullet? Then finally I told Roisin to ring him back, I would do it. Then I got quite excited, I still don't think I'll get elected, but tits good to put that footprint around, build momentum, hopefully encourage someone else later.

I don't focus on the fact that I'm a woman or a protestant, that's not what its about, but I have found the warmest hearth here, the greatest sense of welcome. I am a fluffier socialist then the rest, I can do the hard stuff, but I know my strengths, we need to have socialist debates that go way back to the 1900s – others can do that – I bring those labels for others to see. I'm every woman in a million ways.

It was somewhat hard to join an all-Ireland party as a unionist – I thought, how am I gonna get around this – but it is so not relevant. But how do I communicate that to other people? The global citizen thing I explained the other night has been the best way to do it, the big thing for other people is just to see where I am. That it is part of a conversation. Aye people have been receptive, any who aren't saying anything. But its interesting, it's the first time I'm getting off with the top level of Sinn Fein. I think they see me as some kind of threat, but their policies are their policies.

## **Lynda Walker**

Chairwoman Communist Party Ireland, April 14, 1200pm John Hewitt's Pub

LW: I am from Sheffield originally which complicates my role as Chairwoman of an all-Ireland Communist Party, but I have spent most of my adult life here. My sister and mother joined the P in the late 60s.

Actually as it turns out my mother was rejoining the Communist party, she had left my father in the 1930s and gone off to work with them, but then they got back together and had my sister and me. But they rejoined. And then I don't know, it must have been something about reading Willy Gallagher's book, and the anti-Vietnam movement, but I got involved pretty soon after that. Then I moved over here from Sheffield in 1969.

We would have fraternal links with the CP in England and throughout the world. The Greek and Indian parties put together a New International to try and get things started. Their website is Solidnet.

So in 1970 you had the joining of the parties in the Republic and here. The communist youth league had merged earlier, and they had developed a unity conference. In many ways it was progressive and forward looking, but you have two different sets of issues. In the Republics the issue is debt and trying to wean the Trade Unions away from the politicians. In the north the TU movement is more proactive, but you have the whole remnants of the bombing and bullets campaign.

Me: No I have heard that there has been some controversy as to how connected the CPI was with the IRA and the likes.

LW: No controversy, we were not connected to the OIRA, but when Sinn Fein initially separated from the IRA, we saw Sinn Fein as a potentially progress and anti-imperialist force. But they just drove a wedge between the working classes. There is a 1962 document of the Communist Party that talks about this. The GFA was a step forward, but it was problematic – there are things happening today that never would have happened before, cross community action. There is a determination in Non-profits organizations and the women's sector and on the Shankill that I have



been involved in. No one mentions Protestants or Catholics, people are just accepted for what they are. Almost like a cooperative.

I was involved in setting up a women's center, I've been involved in a lot of these things, like the Women's coalition. What you have to remember about the Women's coalition is that it was just that – a collation – there were conservatives, Sinn Fein, a communist. They knew I was a Communist, some people have tried to claim that I hid it from them, but everyone knew. I stood on the Shankill, and I didn't come from the Shankill. This guy has written a lot of criticism about me and what I do as a communist and women's rights activist and I sat on the policing board with him and he was polite but then he wrote this stuff, so I just put it up on my facebook, the right-wing bastard.

There was a time when I couldn't walk up the shankill – now I have the freedom to do that, and work there and teach there. The receptivity to Communism in the Prot communities hasn't been great, there is still a fundamentalist attitude toward communism, but we have people in the ship yards who were looked up to and in the unions – so they see contradictions, Communists involved in these struggles like Betty Sinclair are looked up to, but we don't get much political support.

We have run candidates in the past – just after the war we got about 2-3 thousand votes, mainly in East Belfast and Bainbridge – and we have stood throughout the years. In the 1980s a bit, and leading up to the peace talks. We challenged them when they said that only 12 parties could run for the peace talks, said that was undemocratic, and it went through the courts and the legislation was changed. After that we felt like we had to stand for those elections though we didn't get much support.

We have our doubts about mode of campaigning, about the amount of effort and money it takes to stand just for the small amount of votes we'll get. But its good publicity. We had a major downturn in the 90s. But we published a document on the IRA and resistance in NI called the ARMED STRUGGLE and its very good, we are thing about reprinting it, since it is still very relevant. Especially with the other Republican activities that are still going on, which make no sense. If they really wanted Irish sovereignty they should go south and bomb the banks. However the police will always be in defense of the state, but how far do you move from revolution to reform? And what do you do in the meantime? We are still working toward that revolution. But after the collapse of the Socialist Countries it has been horrible. The US, France and Britain wouldn't have the run of the world they do now if the Soviets were still alive. They had their problems, they were by no means perfect, but what they have now is much much worse. IT is as if someone was playing a classical piece of music poorly, all the right things are there its just not being done well.

I have never really been the one to get into major arguments about theory and stuff like that, you should talk to Eugene McCartan for that. But I have sat down

and discussed these issues with Trotskyites and they see us as very much Stalinist, which we aren't. We see them as ultra-leftist organizations more concerned with selling papers than fighting the cause. But there is still some discussion between us. They tend to see the CP as more of the problem than capitalists! Promoting themselves more than the cause. And I think this can be a destructive force, but I don't really have any examples in mind so I'm somewhat uncomfortable with saying that.

So now we are involved in the Trade Union movements, the women's movement. Projects challenging sectarianism and racism. International Brigade which commemorates the fight against fascism in the Spanish civil war. Youth committee. Communism still something not spoken about widely, almost clandestine. People are still a little afraid to be found out, think they might lose their jobs.

Talk to Joe Bowers if you want.

We don't like to talk about our membership numbers.

## **Dawn Purvis**

Independent MLA for East Belfast, at her constituency offices, April 14 330pm

Me: So what has it been like running as an independent now after having been in a party before?

DP: It has been a brand new experience, I have had to start from scratch – I don't have party infrastructure to work with.

Me: So why has it been important to identify as a unionist now?

DP: Because I'm a unionist.

Me: So do you think it would be better in a party?

DP: It's very different on my own, very difficult, having to sell myself, to market myself, very difficult to ask people for money when it's just you – it's a lot easier when it's for a party, selling brands, selling manifestos, selling a range of candidates – this has me just a little bit out of my comfort zone. Which isn't to say it isn't a little enjoyable.

Me: Are people receptive to independents?

DP: I have to explain a lot. People don't know what it means. People don't understand how one is politically independent. But generally people have taken me very warmly and positively, like the idea of having a maverick in the Assembly.

However on the other hand, some see it as a weakness. What influence could you have, what clout, without the support of a party structure? So then I have to

explain what I have achieved, it has sharpened my explanatory powers, and people are receptive to that. Its kind of enjoyable when you find someone who says “yours politicians are all the same, useless. You do nothing.” Then I explain my record of lobbying on behalf of the most vulnerable and I show hem what I’ve done, people’s attitude really changes.

Me: When you left the PUP did you consider joining another party?

DP: No. When I resigned from the PUP I received formal and informal approaches from everyone from the most left to the most right. And I just said, if you were attractive, I would have joined in the first place. But there is something not there in being an independent, in order to really make change you need political power and it’s hard to have that as an individual.

Me: So where are you on the political spectrum? And why didn’t you join one of the socialist parties?

DP: I would identify as a progressive socialist. But there are too many left groups and too much infighting between them. A bit like the right wing, they all think they are right , all think they have the best policies, and never get their act together to be a formidable force for change. So I’m more interested in working on issues, collaborating with parties around issues not ideology.

Educational underachievement is one of my big issues now. Mental Health how to support. I don’t campaign in nationalist areas, I’m too easily identifiable as a unionist. But I have communication with nationalists once a fortnight, once a week or so in my constituency office. I would expect to get some transfer votes from those areas, because they would see that I would work for all people – there is somewhat more of an appeal for not being a member of any political party, but I don’t know. It’s been great because it has freed me up to campaign on local issues, focus on East Belfast, don’t have to have an opinion on anything that doesn’t worry people here.

Gender is awful here, I want to see more women vote, women and young people who don’t vote – I would imagine that it is the same in the states where its just a lot of white angry men. Which creates a political class there. I’m working on initiatives to encourage women to vote. There is also a lack of women in politics in general, only 13% participation in government. Worst record in the world. There are 38 women in 218 candidates this time and not all are standing in safe seats, besides being 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> running partners.

Political parties themselves are not selecting women, or encouraging women who make up 52% of the population. So they are not represented at all. It is so important to have the perspective, or else you have people churning out policy and legislation who are not best placed to do it. It is proven that decision bodies that are more diverse, and have more women, have more serving, better long term more strategic approaches. Male dominated views on traditional values get reinforces. If they continue to grow at this rate it will take 250 years for women to be proportionally represented. Leadership of PIP encouraged me every step of the way,

elected right when women before me had broken ground. Women's coalition were treated horribly by the DUP. I haven't experienced that kind of prejudice.

## **Conall McDevitt**

SDLP MLA from South Belfast, at his constituency office, 15 April 9:00 am.

(His offices on the second floor of a building on Lisburn road. He lets me in. Makes us coffee. Sit at his desk. Clear clutter. Crazy office. He tells me they've been working till 10pm every night, so they get started a little later in the day. Had just taken his kids to school. On the phone a lot with people planning interview on BBC for later and what to say about biker who had just been killed on Ormeau Rd. He's wearing a pin stripe suit and a paisley tie. He has an anti-racism bracelet on and Amnesty International cufflinks. )

CM: The good Friday Accords creates 2 important things as a nation – it provides a framework to deal with the constitutional question, giving the power back to the people, providing that consent is fundamental; and it affects the context we have to work with.

It provides for an environment where my nationalism is unaffected, but we can still have a stable powerful, power sharing government in Northern Ireland. We should agree that irrespective of what side of the constitutional debate one is on, you are able to participate in the rebirth of Northern Ireland. The GFA creates a new region and gives us unprecedented opportunity to change both the 6 counties and all of Ireland. It will change the way in which people will eventually come to the constitutional question – because the key to a United Ireland is in the North – because there are 1.5 million protestants who have the right to say no as long as they wish.

There is the traditional Republican response which is to say that we will just breed them out, play the numbers game. Well you can do that, or you can change the terms of the debate. We can make Northern Ireland the most powerful region in either the UK or Ireland. We can unite people in Northern Ireland out of that shared determination to transform Ireland. We will be united because of demographic pressures, that is always on board, it makes people aware of how a referendum could go. But do you want to win that referendum based on Sectarian pressures? Or on the conscious choice of everyone made out of their own self-interest.

Nationalism needs to prove now that we can make Northern Ireland work for everyone, regardless of identity. Because it will be much easier to say we have and will continue to work unprejudiced for our fellow regionalists, to build together and make it work.

Me: Don't you think it might be easier to do this from a position not of Nationalism? If you have to work across the communal bounds, why not join a party that reflects that?

CM: IF we engage in denying who we are, we are denying the need to build a new North within our community, instead we would be creating a third sort of less real community. We can be proud of who we are, but change the terms of how we engage, what it means to be who we are. IT will – History tells us – that if you deny identity, it will come back to bite us.

During this election campaign I've been spending a disordinate amount of time talking to ordinary people, and they have said things to me like, "If you were a unionist I'd vote for you." And what they are saying is, "I like you and your possibilities, but the tribal connection says no." Then they'll say, "Well I'll give you a number 2 vote."

And I see this as the beginning of a long period where the constitutional question will not drive politics. People will cross species lines. They will see renewal in communities, and want tot support them no matter who is leading it. That will create a new dynamic. When we canvass, we knock on every door despite having the list of who these houses voted for in the last several elections. Much of South Belfast is incredibly mixed up, and we are seeing how we can grow out of these areas. (points to a map) see that black area there, it is a staunchly loyalist working class area, and yet we still get 20% of the vote there. They have UDA murals on their walls, what are 20% of the people they're voting for us for? They might be rebels; they might be trying to challenge the mainstream of their parties, or might genuinely want to support our policies beyond the National question.

The GFA changes the rules of Nationalism and Unionism. Approaching the new forms of N and U with the old styles of operating is like trying to squeeze a square kiddy cube into the round kiddy toy hole. N and U have been a reductionist struggle traditionally, made even worse with their symmetry with religion and culture, language.

GFA creates another level of the new Northern Ireland, says we can govern ourselves – throws power at us slowly over the next 20 years, and gives us the power of ver. the decision to stay in the union. It is incentivising partnership, shared institutions, tells people to focus on the shared bits. N and U can't just be polar opposites. I think it acknowledges that we are sectarian but to say it institutionalizes it is to miss the point of reconciliation. It could support sectarianism, but if people come to with transformational politics it doesn't have to. Unfortunately Sinn Fein and the DUP have not come with this attitude.

I could find a home in Sinn Fein, we share a similar progressive social ideology, I'm lefty like that. But they are more partisan than they are patriotic. More into the partisan than they are into developing Ireland or Britain. It is scary I admit, to ask people to leave their identities, make them more flexible, is a difficult thing.

But we saw it in the last few weeks and it has been fascinating. When a PSNI officer is murdered we have to unite as northerners, and people have united. It wasn't the appearance of the Taoiseach at the funeral that showed it, it was the

presence of PSNI officers at a service at a Catholic church, it was his PSNI partners handing the coffin off to his former GAA team mates.

Me: What about the cuts? Don't they pose a threat to the ability to develop Northern Ireland as a cohesive region?

CM: When we are faced with difficult decisions we have two options, we can go reactionary and always blame someone else – or we can see it as an opportunity to go forward. There is a 1-1.5 billion pounds – a shit ton of money – that we spend each year on managing division, duplication of services. Not to mention a disproportionate amounts from security and policing that division.

We know that a diversity of education, not a one-size fits all approach, will best serve our children. But we have a massive opportunity here to save and transform our society through shared faith schools. Then there is the size of the government, shrinking isn't just what we need, we need to grow a private sector – with connections to GB and the South – and the creative thinking that is going on around these issues wouldn't be happening without the financial pressure. All of these things could be very positive.

Me: How does it change campaigning that every party has been in power and will continue to be in power?

CM: It totally changes campaigning – you are voting on how strong the party will be in the next government – how big of a voice. So you have to be much more focused on your party's program for governing – because the more will be implemented. The SDLP has really pushed this year to have the whole government agree on a program before we go to picking ministries. Because we don't know which ministries we'll end up with, you have to campaign on a whole program – should be preapproved. The point is to avoid silo ministries where it is understood that one party always does that one thing. WE want all the ministers to go into the government interested in making this region work. WE are looking for a more corporate approach.

## **Paddy Meehan**

Socialist Party Candidate South Belfast, Queens Student Union, April 18<sup>th</sup> 530pm

Me: So I guess I just want to start out by asking why you are running? And why you are a member of the Socialist Party?

PM: Well in the Socialist Party we like to think that politics is not really about the personalities, so I would answer about talking about why young people would be involved in the Socialist Party, why a young person would be running for office. For me it started with the Iraq War. When the War started we organized a student walk out. This grew into a sense of the need for wider action, walking out and more, the need to find an anti-sectarian force – what could defeat sectarianism? Where

could it come from? And in a place like Northern Ireland, the sectarianism pervades all relationships, plays a role in every interaction.

I wouldn't have been a revolutionary when I first began. But through discussions and work with various people I grew into more of a Marxist. I started to read a lot more, history, of Northern Ireland, where the troubles really came from. Different from the mainstream Republican movement that understands right now as a point of the armed struggle where you can convince Protestants to come over to their side without violence. This really started to begin with the attack in Omagh, which would have been my first year of secondary school.

I would have always distrusted the Catholic Church – and so the Socialist party seemed like an alternative to sectarianism. I saw the SP as a force for this and for all working class groups. My family would have had a pretty strong TU background, and there you had true cross-community work. But they did not take a political voice because they were not green and orange. There was a hesitancy to get to involved. They were British unions, so they were supposedly represented by the British Labour party, but there was no political connection here. But there was campaigning – in 1972 there was a mass party – that was the NILP with Paddy Devlin. It took a huge radical turn. This was mainly because of the classist gerrymandering, the property based voting. The point is that we see that our future has to be in mass struggles – not waking up one morning and seeing the nature of the system laid bare. It has to be in the face of situations where we have to unite out of necessity.

The paramilitary killings are based on dividing workers, the mid-Ulster general strike set a precedent that that could be overcome. Then in 2001 when a catholic postman was killed, an immediate mass walkout forced the disbandment of the RHC. Both the struggle for a class consciousness and the armed struggle are coming to a head now, but they can both rise at the same time, more divided, and more attempts to reconcile that.

You can see the start of this class consciousness every where, but the effects of the 90's capitalism, the fall of the USSR – it was a defeat for workers – now there was only one way to run society, Fukushima and the end of history and all that. But the 2000s were for socialism what the Berlin wall falling was for neoliberalism = the question now is who will have the most decisive leadership – one has to win out and one has to be smashed.

The 1970s NILP were like that, dynamic and and a force to move on and destroy. A response to British imperialism – intentional division of the working class.. The response of the TU leaders was that of Billy Boyd, deciding to become a wing of the state. Then there was an element of the NILP that was protestant evangelical and they all moved all the way to the right and started a religious organizations. Then the call from Protestant jobs for Protestant workers. No independent organization.

Our organization was born out of this. The well-known Trotskyites of British Militant. We saw the repression of the paramilitaries as an oppressive force to the Working Class.

Me: Why do you still run if you get such small votes.

PM: So we get very small votes, but the issue is that politics here is not fought on class lines, always fought on who leads the sectarian division and which sect is bigger. At a certain point you have to put forth an alternative, a heightening of political consciousness. And we run to shore up the parties, to make sure there is an active layer of Trade Unionists and the most advanced of the working class see s. Not about elections, that is not our main activity, it's about the campaigns on issues.

Without a movement from below they will move to the right, elections are only a snap shot of the political moment. The cuts will be hammered into the working class, and they know from experience how we can fight the cuts while not ignoring the structures like the Trade Unions and Community groups do. So it becomes a question of how you oppose, some will say it is necessary, but where? They don't have a satisfactory answer, they just pit people against people. But only so much can be done with raising taxes and cutting services – the problems are deeper, they are about how society is run, who manages wealth. We would argue for a democratic control of the entire societies wealth. It hits young people through the EMA, taking young people into the struggle, unemployment to, but that has not hit them yet.

Me: Catholics Protestants?

PM: We are making important toeholds in both communities right now – using this election to get stronger in both. After omagh though, many Protestants just reject us, see all politicians as sectarian, no toleration from the paramilitaries.

Me: So what do you think about the divisiveness on the left? Any chance for a ULA here?

PM: There are different circumstances here than in the south. In the South it was a question of who would be the opposition? With Fine Gael and Labour in power – hoping to be the opposition and to change in bank and financial system. It was a timely initiative. But here we know that we will still get a small vote. We hope that McCann will get in, but big question of national question and our differences there.

We've all participated in stop the cuts campaigns in NI. We're in favor of unity, but not through the click of fingers. It will be in fresh layers of working class and an increase in struggle. Any new party would have to be democratic and federal, allowing for opposing views but with a democratic mandate of the majority. ULA could become a party, but not at the present of the North. Parties would have to have anti-sectarian understanding. South issues are a bit easier. If McCann gets in: SWP says Orange can't march in catholic areas, SP says people have right to express culture and the working class have overarching right to be free of sectarianism have



to have a democratic compromise. McCann gave critical support of the PIRA for being anti-imperialist, but Marxists have to be against individual terrorism everywhere so that the Working Class can unify. What would the main socialist rep say in the end? WE have to call things as they are, we can't just take popular decisions.

The Communist party had a close affiliation with the OIRA – and they have been a rightwing force in the union. Don't play at being a liberal leftwing force – they've expelled our members in the union – they have a huge history, but less so in the presence. But now they are just this Stalinist party that isn't really doing anything.

The Workers party is still active, mainly take elections, and take unity through a very formulaic approach. Sort of shot themselves in the foot on both sides, connected to the OIRA but also seen as protestant. A force that ratted out on others. But they are in the stop the cuts campaign.

I really think that it will come down to who has the youth and who will win. The big split in the SWP in Belfast has meant a los of their youth. It's about taking political ideas and putting them into practice.

The importance of an international is crucial to understand – historic weakness of a mass international force – but America in WI using skype to bring people together. Even the national question has been connation to other countries, don't have that fight, want happen need many countries. The revolutionary party has to reflect the WC – the national question reflects that.

Me: SP all Ireland party?

PM: One party, separate objectives, and structures. Not because of some romantic ideas bout a united Ireland but because of the real connection between both north and south would be most efficient use of resource's But also a very strong connection to the SPs in Wales Scotland and England. Ultimately we see a Socialist Ireland as part of a voluntary federation of socialist England Scotland and Wales. But we would be in favor of an autonomous region in the North as a temporary solution. But we can't believe those that say prots would have nothing to fear in a united Ireland today, any minority has to fear in a capitalist government. Protestants have right to fear – These are civil war arms, should their be a separate part – no because its appealing to the lowest common denominator Sectarianism is not a stoic thing. One will win out. Socialist Party has socialist and republicans, and it was intentional having that British councilor and Irish TD. Language will have to change, can't use words like 32 counties because of the 32 CSM. Sinn Fein is run like a military organization. WE call it Derry. Write some articles in Irish some in English, none in Ulster Scot yet but maybe soon. Some material in polish – not celebrate diversity, but put jobs in the homes not racism. Won over the area despite jobs. We don't romanticize the working class.