



Reflections on the anti-war movement

Paul Moloney

Before making a number of personal observations on the activities of the anti-war movement in Ireland, I think it is necessary to take the opportunity to analyse some general aspects of opposition to the war in an international context.

In the war that has just ended—well, at least the televised/reported part of it—the left was severely tested by the warmongers. They cut across the terrain of the left by encouraging ordinary people to question the motives of the left, and indeed all who opposed the war. These forces, they claimed, oppose the overthrow of regimes who are a threat to ‘western civilisation’ (whatever that is) and in fact were supportive of cruel tyrants. Moreover, there, in some ways, lies the current dilemma for the left. Because certain elements of the left are to a certain extent guilty. Such lefts advocate the defeat of the US empire, not by supporting the struggles of peoples for liberation from imperialism, but by supporting reactionary regimes that socialists had opposed for years. There is a need to look at this anew. To be against Saddam or any other despot is not a betrayal: in fact, it is a cornerstone of a socialist outlook.

What does amount to a betrayal is failure to assert that imperialism, even in its new ‘humanitarian’ guise, is equally as bad if not subtly worse. These new ‘humanitarian’ wars will not be sold to the western public as what they really are: wars that further the interests of transnational corporations. They will not be sold as wars for American global dominance. They will be sold as wars for the removal of weapons of mass destruction, for the removal of evil dictators, for the defeat of international terrorism. ‘Humanitarian imperialism’ is a clever tool. It asks the world: which you would prefer, a life similar to the ‘free and democratic’ citizens of the USA, or the ‘impoverished, backward, fundamentalist dupes of the dictator’?

It is hard not to be swayed by the influence of this picture of a clean, homogenous western society. The ordinary person is constantly drip-fed by corporate media to ensure that they develop just the right fear of the next great threat to humankind. We can be sure that, in many cases, the monsters that provide the Darth Vader of the show are former acolytes of Washington who happen to be out of favour with their former masters. The propaganda is relentless and unceasingly one-sided. This does not negate the fact that horrendous deeds are carried out by certain regimes or that their leaders are cruel tyrants, but at no time do the disseminators of disinformation take time to navel-gaze at the shortcomings of their own masters and their own regimes. We also need to remind ourselves that Hugo Chavez is not Kim Jong Il, that many of those movements which oppose US imperialism are progressive and rightly demand our active solidarity.

Under this relentless pressure, many working class people are won over to the concept of support for whatever action ‘needs to be taken’ to remove the ‘current threat’ to this mythical western way of life. The role of the left is to counter this propaganda and to win the mass of people over to actively opposing the new imperialism, as well as clarifying the connection between it and capitalism as it operates in their own country. With this in mind, let us turn to analysing the success or otherwise of the anti-war campaign in Ireland.

The writer of this article was co-opted onto the steering committee of the Irish Anti-War Movement in October 2002. Despite the commendable initiative taken and sustained by the founders of the IAWM, there were some weaknesses apparent from the beginning. A more democratic mode of organisation could have been arrived at, a different name might have

been more suitable (socialists do not oppose the concept of the 'class war', or a 'war on poverty'). The organisation was largely Dublin-centred rather than a national movement, and there did not seem to be space for all opinions opposed to this war. The glaring omission was the autonomous left, the more libertarian sections of the movement, those who prioritised direct action. From early on, it became obvious that certain components sometimes saw the IAWM simply as a vehicle to build their own organisation and further their own programme, as opposed to finding the best way to oppose this war.

There were early signs of this on 12 October at a mass protest in Shannon. Sections of the anti-war movement proposed a mass trespass which would cause embarrassment to those allowing a civilian airport to be used as a key military installation in Bush's war. It was obvious that a key task of the anti-war movement was to increase awareness of this despicable act, that flew in the face of Bertie Ahern's Chamberlain-like announcement of 'neutrality in our time' which was instrumental in winning the second Nice Treaty referendum. Yet on that date, the authoritarian nature of a strand of what was to become a very large movement became evident, as they attempted through loudhailers to police what was going on because they feared losing control. One can only regret that the trespass had not been bigger and that it had not been better organised.

It would be petty not to credit the IAWM for its preparation for the massive 15 February demonstration in Dublin. The work of the organisation was the key factor in bringing such large numbers out on the streets. To ignore this would be sectarian in the extreme. Of course, other objective factors also contributed to this turnout. These included fairly favourable media coverage (prior to Day X, when the war broke out) and the opportunistic involvement of the Labour Party, which not long before had supported a treaty which furthers the process of establishing a competing European imperialist force. On 15 February it looked like we might make a real impact, with the government hesitating and even Fine Gael taking a supposedly anti-war position. In fact, an opportunity was largely lost because the movement fell into the trap of setting out its stall too early. This manifested itself in overdoing the important tactic of mass demonstrations. This simply led to 'march fatigue', as there were only so many times people were going to listen to the same speeches from more or less the same speakers telling those who did not need reminding why they were there. What was necessary was, not to abandon this tactic, but for it to be combined with a less schematic approach. It is the most basic rule of struggle that tactics should be adapted to the terrain of the struggle at any given time.

15 February was the highpoint of the campaign. Around 150,000 people took to the streets of the capital city in tandem with millions throughout the world. That this worldwide demonstration was unable to stop the war did not demean the exercise: it only points to the disregard with which the US ruling elite view the wishes of the mass of ordinary people, and the complicity of Ireland's homegrown elite as represented in this instance by the Fianna Fáil/PD government.

A low point, however, was reached with the antics that went on around the 1 March demonstration in Shannon, which at times descended into farce. There was open demonisation of the planned direct action by the few who were intent on maintaining control of the 'leadership of the movement'. Whatever about the precise actions proposed, there was a need to use the tactic of 'direct action' to expose the surrender of a civilian airport to the needs of the US war machine. It would have been better if this had have been through the actions of airport workers and the people of Shannon, but in light of the fact that little was done by anyone to advance this option besides talking it up, other options should have been considered. From then on, the movement was on the back foot because of the lack of unity, which exposed the lack of democratisation within the movement. The state smelt blood and reacted with an arrogant lack of respect for the public mood. The heavy-handed action of the riot squad outside Dáil Éireann on 2 April was one display of this disregard, as

was the over-the-top policing of the last protest at Shannon.

The purpose of this short, personal history is not to have a pop at political opponents or to criticise for the sake of criticism. There is nothing worse than being lectured by those who play no active role in a struggle just as that struggle reaches a turning point. Simply put, lessons must be learnt, because without doubt this is not the end of the implementation of the imperialist 'project for a new American century'. The movement needs to move beyond being the organisers of well-attended demos and assemblies, important as these events are in themselves. There is a need to democratise the movement fully as a national movement, with space for all those opposed to imperialism, whether in its US or European guise. In particular, a serious attempt has to be made to raise consciousness around the issues of the use of Shannon Airport, the linkage between anti-imperialism and anti-capitalism, and opposition to the newly emerging European rival imperialism. For this to happen there needs to be an open and democratic debate about structure, tactics and aims in the whole anti-war movement sooner rather than later.

Red Banner 16
July 2003