



Socialism beyond the Pale

Aindrias Ó Cathasaigh

Last October Dublin was brought to a standstill by a march of 40,000 farmers demanding social welfare payments for farmers below the poverty line. Dublin Labour MEP Bernie Malone took to the airwaves to repel the advancing peasant hordes, declaring “Farmers have no right to disrupt my city.”¹ ICTU head honcho Peter Cassells chimed along with the chamber of commerce’s denunciation: these “bully-boy tactics”, he said, were “irresponsible and foolish”, going so far as to call the march an “invasion”.² Failing to support such a just demand, let alone defending the right to protest, was of a piece with a rotten tradition among much of the leadership of the labour movement. Democratic Left, during its brief will-of-the-wisp existence, hardly ever missed an opportunity to blame an undifferentiated bloc of ‘farmers’ for all the ills of the working class—even as they hastened into coalition with some of the real culprits.

All this should come as no surprise, of course, and Bernie Malone can quite easily be sent for re-education in a slurry tank after the revolution. But further to the left, amidst those who are supposed to know better, jackeen socialism can often be found alive and kicking. A belief that the proletariat of Dublin is divinely ordained to drag the rest of us to our liberation combines with an anti-rural prejudice far worse than the average Dublin worker and blessed with a bizarre kind of leftish colouration. Even the best of them, when events to the west of Maynooth come within their purview, can sometimes react with bewilderment as their understanding of socialism fails to provide them with any answers. When it comes to rural Ireland many socialists seem content neither to sow nor to reap.

Why bother?

The first thing that needs reiterating is the decline of the Irish countryside. Less people live there than ever before; and less people work in what has traditionally been seen as its primary occupation—agriculture—than ever before. The first Free State census in 1926 showed 67.7% of the population living in rural areas and 53.5% of the working population engaged in agriculture.³ By the 1996 census the rural population was down to 41.9%, and the agricultural labour force down to 10.8%.⁴

Faced with these facts, some socialists may be inclined to ask why we should bother. If the trend is more and more towards the towns and towards industry and services, why should we concern ourselves with the specific problems of rural areas or agriculture?

Such an attitude would betray a very fatalistic conception of socialism. It would leave socialists waiting another three or four decades until the last small farm has been taken from the last small farmer, and the last rural family upped sticks for the big towns, before anything could be done. In the meantime we would presumably sit with our arms crossed, smiling serenely until such a time as capitalism had solved the problem for us. Even in the unlikely event of social development panning out in so simple a manner, such thinking can only satisfy those who can afford to wait for revolution indefinitely.

As well as this, it is an attitude that springs from a very abstract, imported version of socialism, rather than a socialism based on analysing and understanding the conditions the Irish working class finds itself in. Ireland is not a society, like Britain, where the countryside is a negligible factor. Compared to other countries, Ireland’s cities are notable for their weakness. And while, say, Paris has played a capital’s part for the French workers—leading all the great battles of their historical development as a class—Dublin hasn’t (with the glorious exception of 1913) blazed a trail for the Irish workers to follow. When the Irish

working class was at its most revolutionary so far, following the first world war, and workers seizing workplaces the length and breadth of the country, Dublin was most conspicuous by its absence. There are sound historical reasons for this weakness, of course, and none of this is intended as reproach, but the fact remains that Dublin has never earned a truly leading role.

Ignoring rural Ireland would mean that socialism wouldn't penetrate to huge parts of the country, and to the two fifths of the population who live in them. The revolution would be confined to isolated urban fortresses while the surrounding territories were left untouched. The urban socialists would presumably concern themselves with spreading the revolution overseas, but not to certain regions of Ireland itself, re-assigning Connacht to its Cromwellian role.

The links between urban workers and the countryside are also too strong to be overlooked. Most Dublin workers, for instance, if they don't come from rural areas themselves, are married to, related to, live next door to, or work with people who do. A large proportion of the working class works in factories in rural towns. The food industry is an important part of the Irish economy, and the fate of its workers is intimately linked to what goes on in agriculture. A by no means insignificant number of workers are also part-time farmers. (27% of farmers, and 37% of their spouses, have jobs off the farm.⁵) The relationship between the working class and the working people of the countryside is not for the most part one of separation, but one of close connection. Irish workers can't afford the luxury of not having an opinion here, of sitting back and thinking nothing.

The splendid isolation approach is an obstacle to building socialism in Ireland. As Engels put it:

The greater the number of farmers who we can save from being actually hurled down into the proletariat, who we can win to our side while they are still farmers, the more quickly and easily the social transformation will be accomplished. It will serve us nought to wait with this transformation until capitalist production has developed everywhere to its utmost consequences, until the last small handicraftsman and the last small farmer have fallen victim to capitalist large-scale production.⁶

On top of all this, urban prejudice against the country and rural prejudice against the city is one of the means used to divide our class. There is no shortage of rural politicians claiming that an area is poor because 'Dublin' is getting everything; nor of Dublin politicians blaming poverty in the capital on everything going 'down the country'. It is far from unknown for capitalists to play workers from one part of the country against workers from another. Needless to say, these same politicians and capitalists are the ones laughing all the way to the bank as we put the blame on each other. Socialists need an attitude that can overcome such divisions among working people, not one that implicitly goes along with them.

Socialists need to challenge the very geographical division of town versus country. The early socialists used to always point to this division as one of capitalism's worst evils, cramping and limiting the abilities and outlook of human beings, "a subjection that makes a narrow-minded town animal of one, a narrow-minded country animal of another", in the words of Marx and Engels.⁷ Eliminating the antagonism between town and country was among the immediate measures proposed in the Communist Manifesto for a socialist revolution. In Ireland, the fact that a million-odd people are squashed in and around Dublin while entire swathes of the country are depopulated—like people crowding to one end of a sinking ship, pulling everyone else after them—is one of the most irrational results of capitalist development, piling up environmental and other problems.

Finally, for the working class to take control of society, we need to win other oppressed groups behind our banner, widening the sweep of revolution into an all-encompassing assault on exploitation in all its forms. Lenin said it well:

the industrial workers cannot accomplish their epoch-making mission of emancipating mankind from the yoke of capital and from wars if they confine themselves to their narrow craft or trade interests, and smugly restrict themselves to attaining an improvement in their own conditions... The proletariat is a really revolutionary class and acts in a really socialist manner only when it comes out and acts as the vanguard of all the working and exploited people, as their leader in the struggle for the overthrow of the exploiters; this, however, cannot be achieved unless the class struggle is carried into the countryside...⁸

The class struggle in the countryside

The struggle of the working class is by no means confined to the big towns. Thousands of workers work in factories in small towns up and down Ireland. News stories of large workplaces opening up or (more often) closing down have educated many people geographically if nothing else, introducing them to places they never heard of before, and should educate them as to the existence of the rural working class. These workers face the problems workers face everywhere, and fight against them as workers do everywhere, and have just as much to contribute to our movement as any other section of the class.

The poverty of rural Ireland is often forgotten, but rivals anything to be found in the cities. Indeed, a survey by the Combat Poverty Agency concludes that “the highest risk of poverty is in villages and towns with populations of less than 3,000”.⁹ A map of the geographical distribution of wealth throughout the 26 counties¹⁰ has shown that pockets around Galway city, Sligo town, and Letterkenny are the only areas of affluence to be found in Connacht and the north west. Social services outside the cities are, often as not, pathetic. When a town of 2,000 people has to wait for the nearest ambulance to come from thirty miles away, then this oppression can become literally a matter of life and death.

Talk of ‘the farmers’ doing well or badly is one of the most meaningless abstractions in Irish political discourse. There are big farmers, and there are small farmers: social divisions within ‘the farming community’ run very deep. 64% of farmers survive on a farming income of less than £10,000 a year, and 40% on less than half that, while the top 7% exceed £30,000.¹¹

European grants, ostensibly aimed at promoting rural development, have become a weapon in the hands of well-off farmers to enrich themselves and drive small farmers off the land. Because subsidies are given according to production levels, those who produce more are given more. As a proportion of their farm income, farmers of over 100 hectares derive over two thirds more from grants than farmers of 20-30 hectares do.¹² Two fifths of tillage grants go to the top 4% of tillage farmers, while the bottom 90% get less than a third.¹³ Since the South joined the Common Market, half of all farmers have left the land. Apart from making rich farmers richer, the main impact of EU agriculture policy is to raise food prices for working people – both in the towns and outside.

The so-called farmers’ organisations in reality represent only the big farmers. Although a greater proportion of the population of Connacht is involved in agriculture than in any other province, only once in its history has a Connachtman headed the IFA. The reason is that western farms are the smallest, and western farmers the poorest, in the country. The IFA (and the even richer ICMSA) is the voice of the successful farmer: not the poor farmer trying to scrape a living from a few acres of bad land, but the strong farmer with a couple of hundred acres of good land. Their poor mouth pleads, and their hand is outstretched, for the benefit of the big shots. The poverty of small farmers is nothing more than a convenient hook upon which to hang their own demands – and they have been nothing if not successful.

This antagonism has led to attempts by small farmers to organise independently of their betters. But, from Clann na Talmhan in the 1930s and 1940s to the United Farmers’ Association in the 1990s, little has come of them. Small-scale agriculture is a particularly

individual type of production, separating the small farmer from other small farmers, not bringing them together as a capitalist workplace brings workers together. The reality is that small farmers as a group don't have enough social weight to achieve what they need. They need to draw the conclusion that Marx drew a long time ago:

It is evident that their exploitation differs from the exploitation of the industrial proletariat only in *form*. The exploiter is the same: *capital*.... The farmer's title deed is the talisman with which capital has thus far spellbound him, the pretext on which it has stirred him up against the industrial proletariat. Only the fall of capital can raise the farmer, only an anti-capitalist, proletarian government can break his economic misery, his social degradation.¹⁴

They therefore find their natural allies and leader in the *urban proletariat*, whose task is the overthrow of the bourgeois order.¹⁵

Whether the small farmers respond to such an appeal depends, obviously, on whether they hear such an appeal. If all they hear from the workers' movement is the urban parochialism of Malone, Cassells, et al, or if they hear nothing at all, then the backward-looking side of the farmer's soul will triumph: the side determined to cling to his miserable biteen of land against all outsiders. But if an alternative, revolutionary voice reaches them, the forward-looking side could win: the side full of anger at his desperate condition, wanting to do something about it.

This means that socialists have to stop seeing themselves as an exclusively urban movement. We need to support the stirrings of rural rebellion, whether it be poor farmers demanding a decent standard of living, a community demanding that their bus route be kept going, or whatever. Our job is to argue that the pro-capitalist politicians, priests and pundits who currently weigh down the 'save rural Ireland' bandwagon are no good to them, that the workers in the towns are their true friends, and that running society in a socialist way offers them the chance of a human existence.

What this doesn't mean is opportunism, promising small farmers the impossible—that each farmer will have his own patch of land, that things will be like they used to be, and everyone will live happily ever after. The days of small farming are long gone. Not only is it a wasteful way of production; for the farmers themselves it means a life of drudgery (a sixty-hour week on average¹⁶), permanently on the brink of ruin, at the mercy of the market and the weather. And plenty of small farmers are well aware of that much for themselves, as they see their sons and daughters voting with their feet, giving farming up as a bad job. A recent study by UCD academics claims that 3,000 people are leaving agriculture every year.¹⁷

Socialist farming

A socialist revolution would aim to re-organise agriculture just as it would any other branch of production—to bring the land into common ownership, and farm it collectively to provide for human needs. At the top end of the scale this should present no problem at all: millionaire farmers can be expropriated just like millionaire industrialists; socialising thousand-acre farms should be easy. But under no circumstances should poor farmers have their land taken from them. Not only would this make enemies of thousands of small farmers—and thousands of working-class people who would stand by them—it would have no part to play in the building of socialism.

The working class, as Marx wrote,

must, as government, adopt measures by which the farmer finds his condition immediately improved, so as to win him for the revolution; measures, however, which potentially ease the transition from private ownership of land to collective ownership, so

that the farmer comes to it himself, economically; it must not antagonise the farmer...¹⁸

Small farmers must be *persuaded* to move over to co-operative farming, encouraged to pool their land into bigger farms to be worked in common. Where compulsion would inevitably fail, the example of other co-operative farms and the self-evident benefits for the farmers themselves would be most likely to succeed. And as for the farmer who wants to hold out, fair enough: in Engels's words, "we shall do everything at all permissible to make his lot more bearable, to facilitate his transition to the co-operative should he decide to do so, and even to make it possible for him to remain on his small holding for a protracted length of time to think the matter over".¹⁹ Tactics in regard to in-between farms would depend on the particular circumstances the revolution found itself in; but compulsion would be unlikely to feature much here either.

Socialism would have to be a decentralised affair: it couldn't be bureaucratically run from Dublin. The small farmers of Leitrim won't be won over to socialist agriculture by commissars from the capital who wouldn't know one end of a bullock from the other; they will be won over by the workers of Carrick-on-Shannon and Manorhamilton, arguing and cajoling on the basis of their shared experience. One of the feats of the Paris Commune of 1871, wrote Marx, was that it sought to bring "the rural producers under the intellectual lead of the central towns of their districts, and these secured to them, in the working men, the natural trustees of their interests".²⁰

For the small farmers and the people of rural Ireland generally, a condition of their liberation is realising that following the political lead of a revolutionary working class is their hope. The working class, in turn, has to realise its duty to provide such a lead. Socialism needs to go beyond the Pale.

Red Banner 4
May 1999

Notes

- 1 *Irish Times*, 27 October 1998.
- 2 *Irish Times*, 28 October 1998.
- 3 *Census 91*, vol 1 (Dublin 1993), p 10; Ronnie Munck, *The Irish Economy* (London 1993), p 43.
- 4 *Census 96*, vol 1 (Dublin 1997), p 19; vol 7 (Dublin 1998), p 11. In the North between 1926 and 1991, agriculture's share of the workforce fell from 29% to 7%: Munck, pp 56, 61.
- 5 Chris Curtin, Trutz Haase, Hilary Tovey (eds), *Poverty in Rural Ireland* (Dublin 1996), p 99.
- 6 Engels, *The Peasant Question in France and Germany* (Moscow 1976), p 22 (translation modified).
- 7 'Die deutsche Ideologie', in Karl Marx, *Frühe Schriften* (Darmstadt 1975), vol 2, p 61.
- 8 'Preliminary Draft Theses on the Agrarian Question', in Lenin, *Alliance of the Working Class and the Peasantry* (Moscow 1965), pp 370-71.
- 9 Reported in *Irish Times*, 28 July 1998.
- 10 Reprinted in *ibid*.
- 11 Teagasc, *National Farm Survey 1997*, reported in *The Examiner*, 5 November 1998.
- 12 Curtin et al, p 110. The hectare has never caught on in Ireland, but is equivalent to just under 2½ acres.
- 13 *Irish Times*, 17 November 1998.
- 14 'Die Klassenkämpfe in Frankreich 1848-1850' in Karl Marx, *Politische Schriften* (Darmstadt 1978), vol 1, pp 215-16.
- 15 'Die achtzehnte Brumaire des Louis Bonaparte', in *ibid*, p 380.
- 16 The working week in agriculture averages 60.5 hours, as against 41.6 hours in the economy in general: *Labour Force Survey 1996* (Dublin 1997), p 34.
- 17 *Irish Independent*, 24 November 1998.
- 18 'Konspekt von Bakunins "Staatlichkeit und Anarchie"', in Marx/Engels, *Werke*, vol 18 (Berlin 1969), p 633.
- 19 *Peasant Question*, p 22.
- 20 'The Civil War in France', in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *On the Paris Commune* (Moscow 1971), p 74.