



## **“Socialist trade unionism, not trade union socialism”**

An interview with Michael O'Reilly

*What do you think of the possibility of workers' unity in the North?*

The North has been pulled asunder by the troubles. The divide between the working class is particularly difficult. But I have to say that the Belfast agreement offers the possibility of some co-operation. One, there has to be some kind of a healing process between the two communities, particularly on the level of the working class; and two, there will be an assembly in the North. Working class people have aspirations in the social field and they will make demands on the Assembly. Those demands will have a social rather than a sectarian character. If we can find agreement on what constitutes social exclusion, unemployment, and the other things that affect working class people, and argue for the working class in a totality, we can begin to tackle this. In other words, if there are sections of—for want of a better term—the Catholic working class who suffer marginally worse than the Protestant working class, or vice versa, as long as their representatives—like people in the PUP, in Sinn Féin—have a common definition of social exclusion, then it's an argument about sufficient resources to tackle the problem. And in that way you begin to solve the problem, but I think it will take a long time to get a situation where there will be real, meaningful co-operation.

*Has what happened in Omagh made the situation worse, better, or is it still in a state of shock?*

Well, it's in a state of shock, but it has also made the situation paradoxically—and there are contradictions in this—worse *and* better, in the sense that it's obviously worse because of what it has done to the people of Omagh. When the public grieving is over, on a private basis and in a town like that, it has probably destroyed the lives of a very, very significant number of people and I don't think there's any public way to heal that or to resolve that: that's a personal trauma for each and every one of them, who've seen their loved ones slaughtered and murdered—but the Omagh tragedy highlights the futility of violence in present circumstances, and I think, paradoxically, it will mean greater support for the Belfast agreement rather than less support for it. You don't have to believe that the Belfast agreement is the answer to the problems. What you have to believe is that it lays a structure which has the potential to put aside sectarian violence as the answer to the problem, and it allows for the primacy of politics as the way forward. And I think everybody on the left has an interest in doing that, because elitist, terrorist bombings of this kind, by their nature, exclude the participation of civil society from the debate, and from the idea of advancing the interests of working class people and of people in general. So there's a contradiction in what's happened in Omagh, but in the long term, I believe it will strengthen the agreement rather than weaken it, and the same is also true in what happened in the aftermath of Portadown.

*What do you think about the situation in the south industrially, particularly in relation to Partnership 2000?*

I think there isn't a majority for Partnership 2000. I think it's simply the mechanics of how the votes are counted, and how the votes are counted at the ICTU. I think even

the last agreement was probably – was *certainly* – rejected by a majority of workers in the private sector. And I think actually it's the biggest obstacle to both co-operation and movement on the left. Where the trade union movement sees itself as a three-year referendum club, where the members vote on wages and conditions every three years and then do nothing in the interim, I think that turns off the whole trade union movement, and I think it's very, very anti-democratic. We have hundreds of full-time officers, we have thousands of shop stewards who can, because of these agreements, do very little. They can't make claims on their employers, they can't learn the skills – because these are skills which are only learned by doing: you can't learn them in any other way, and like anything else, if you don't practice the art of free collective bargaining, if you don't hone the skills of negotiating with employers, they become rusty on you, they become out of date. We have a whole generation of trade unionists now who have never actually made a claim on their employer. I believe, because of the growth in the economy, there is no possibility of a repetition of an agreement like Partnership 2000, and I think what we need is an agreement which, if you like, reflects the diversity of the circumstances that we face. Certainly, because workers in the public sector have a common employer, the government, there's nothing wrong with them combining to negotiate with their employer. But that should not be at the expense of the private sector, and these agreements have been constructed by the leadership in Congress in such a way that they have given marginal advantages to the public sector at the expense of workers in the private sector, and they have sown the potential seeds of division which are very, very dangerous in the trade union movement. Now many people are reluctant to speak about this because they feel if you speak about this, you will be seen to be supporting right wing economists and others who argue about holding down public sector wages. That's not the point I'm making. The point I'm trying to make is this: that the restrictions of these agreements on the private sector are dividing the trade union movement, and the private sector actually should be allowed to lead the push for improved wages and conditions, because always, in a period of free collective bargaining, you look to the strong sections of the movement to make a breakthrough, and lead it.

The other thing that's been completely neglected has been the whole question of hours of work, because with the growth of technology, the biggest challenge facing the trade union movement is the question of the hours of work. The hours of work are something that was referred to in Marx's *Capital*. The hours of work was what the first May Day demonstrations took place about. The hours of work are the biggest thing facing us, because if you make a breakthrough on the hours of work, you cannot take it back – employers have historically never been able to take it back. They have, of course, been able to take back wages, through inflation and taxation, and many other things that affect us. So the hours of work are the big issue that's facing us. We need free collective bargaining and we need to make that a big issue because that's relevant in a society where we have huge levels of unemployment. So the hours of work are, I believe, the biggest issue facing the labour movement in Europe as we go into the next century, and I don't see why we shouldn't have a radical slogan like 'A 30-hour week'. After all, this century, we've moved from probably about 80-90 hours down to less than 40. There's no reason why, if our grandparents did this, we shouldn't have the same ambitions for the working class of today.

*What do you think are the chances of left unity?*

Well, I'm not sure what the left is any more. There's been, I suppose, a historic breakdown with the collapse of the socialist countries of eastern Europe, and many people have, because of their association or belief in those countries, lost their vision of building an alternative. Now I think the need for left unity is still there. I think it's a difficult situation to build. I think you have to try and build left unity while simultaneously you have to tolerate left competition. I think if you see unity as a basis of wiping out competition, then you won't get unity. So unity has to take place in diversity and amongst competition, and it seems to me it has to be over a number of very minimum kind of demands. Most people on the left – though not all – would agree that Partnership 2000, for example, is a barrier and it's probably easy to get some kind of a consensus on the left about that. I can't think of any other thing that is so easy to get some kind of a consensus around. And as I say, even on that issue, there would be some people in the Democratic Left who would favour agreements like that. Now, because somebody wants to make an argument over something like that, I don't think they should be excluded from participation in the building of some kind of a broad left. But I think building a broad left both within the trade union movement and in society generally is not easy.

I have to say it is made easier by the Belfast agreement, because the great division in Irish politics has been the whole national question. How we address the Protestant working class, what we say to them, how we build an inclusive kind of socialism, do we do that on all of the island or do we ignore the North? I think most people on the left do wish the Belfast agreement well, and I think because of that it would probably be easier to build left unity, though I think left unity will only be built over a minimum kind of demands. And the big thing that's facing us is that there'll never be any advance for the left whilst the trade union movement and the trade union leadership in particular see themselves as a prop to the government of the day, rather than as independent representatives of the membership, and that's the most important thing the left can do. Win – not the trade union movement to socialism – but simply to win the trade union movement to independence from the state, because if that's not done, there'll be no progress in relation to left unity, and no progress in relation to any other matter.

*Have you any comments on a European currency?*

Well, I'm a sceptic in relation to a single currency. I'm a sceptic in relation to the creation of a single European state. I think the idea that you remove, if you like, the politics and the control from national states to a superstate or a superbank in Europe is, by any definition, anti-democratic. There are, of course, difficulties in relation to the Irish currency standing on its own, but I believe at the end of the day, that's the better thing to do. We can, of course, sack an Irish finance minister. We cannot sack a centralised European bank which we have no control over. And this idea that a single currency is a technically better way of running Europe, I think is disastrous. It has meant and will mean attacks on the welfare state. It is an attempt to try and take the politics out of currency, and I don't think that's possible. And I think there will eventually be a revolt against this kind of thing, because although all the political parties in Ireland seem to favour it, it seems to me that a state has two things which it normally controls: one is an army, and the other is currency. And if you hand over your currency, you're not far away from handing over the state itself. And it's a great paradox, when people are blowing the guts out of Omagh to try and advance the idea of an Irish state, we have an Irish state actually in existence handing over many

of the mechanisms which we need to try and improve the lives of the people. So I am a sceptic. I don't favour the idea of a single currency in Europe. I think it will, in the end, be to the disadvantage of smaller countries, particularly small countries like Ireland.

*It's a while ago now, but have you anything to say about Packard?*

Well, I suppose it was that kind of business where maybe the closure of Packard was inevitable. The lessons to be learned from it are that there are great difficulties in trying to industrialise an economy like Ireland in situations where you simply make components, and you have no control over the end product. There were possibly 28 plants of General Motors which operated on a European level. I think about three or four of them were organised in unions. Most of them were not. The Packard work as such, and what happened in Packard, is part of what's happening in the whole of western Europe. There were about three or four million people who worked in that business throughout western Europe, and the Brookings Institute did a study on that industry and predicted that over half of those jobs would be lost. We were in a very difficult negotiating position in Packard. We had to make very complex judgements about, for example, whether we would defer wage increases; about, for example, whether we would loan the company one extra hour a week's work. Our judgement was that a straightforward simple confrontation of holding everything that we had was not the way to do it. It's like dancing with a bear: it's a very difficult process. But every agreement that we made with Packard—we made no concessions to them, because every agreement started with the words: 'We are loaning you one hour a week, which you owe us, and you will pay back to us in the event of this situation not working out—the same wages, and so on.' So all the conditions at the end of the day were held up.

But the big lesson of Packard is really about the power of multinationals, and I suppose the need to spread trade union organisation. And the trade union movement, although it talks about internationalism, doesn't really invest in it. And there needs to be a dialogue with members about getting more resources, and investing in a better international structure, to try and match, in some measure, the global nature of these multinational corporations. And of course, again, to make the argument at the level of the state, that we would be much better making components in Ireland for cars based on our own resources. We have lead, we have zinc: these go into many of the components of cars, yet we export them in the raw, and we end up with these sub-assembly plants where it's very, very difficult what you can do. I'll say one thing about Packard: it's very difficult to live through a closure and lose almost 2,000 jobs and stand at the end of that and be clapped by workers who would go out and say, at the end of the day, the unions did not let them down. And I think we managed to shift the total burden of the closure on to the company, and we managed to give Packard and General Motors a bad name in the media—now that's very difficult when you think what their advertising budget is. And I think all credit to the shop stewards for the way that they managed that. But at the end of the day, the big lesson in Packard is about the kind of industrialisation you want to go for.

*And finally, why are you in the Labour Party?*

Well, I suppose ultimately the real reason I'm in the Labour Party is I believe in socialist trade unionism, I don't believe in trade union socialism. And unlike many people who are trade union officials, I came to being active in the trade union movement through politics, not the other way around. I was first active in the Connolly Youth Movement, I was then eleven years in the Communist Party, and I

then joined the Labour Party, partly because the union is affiliated to the Labour Party and the union plays a role in the Labour Party. I may say I have never felt comfortable in the Labour Party. It asks actually very little of its membership other than that they be a kind of a support machine for the TDs. But at the end of the day, if you want to try and influence events, you have to influence parliament. Parliament is an important place in the Labour Party. It is the largest representative of working class people and trade union opinion in parliament, and you have to try and influence that. There are a lot of people who would be quite happy to see me outside of the Labour Party. And I have no intention of obliging them.

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