the Leveller
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Hands Off Our Leisure Centres



Opposition has began to Belfast City Council's moves towards outsourcing and privatisation of the cities leisure centres and facilities.

On the 22nd of February the council's strategic policy and resources committee voted to hand our leisure centres over to a trust. In a move to offload essential, but underfunded, services city hall will be ditching 10 leisure centres (11 when the council expands in May).

The council are looking to shed the £8 million a year that it spends to barely maintain our underfunded and rundown leisure centres. 300 workers and thousands of working class families who use leisure centres across the city will be affected. DUP chair of the committee Gavin Robinson has refused to rule out closures. Similar moves in Magherafelt Leisure Centre resulted in the loss of 30 jobs.

Following a meeting attended by over 100 people at Andersonstown Leisure Centre in West Belfast protests have taken place with calls for committees, free of politicians, to be set up across Belfast to defend our services.

Saturday 1st of March saw a well attended protest at the Andersonstown Leisure Centre. The lively and well supported protest finished with a march to the local SDLP offices to protest that parties support for privatisation.

Another protest, organised by unions representing council workers, took place outside Belfast City Hall to coincide with the vote on privatisation going before the council.

Opposition to the council's attempt at backdoor privatisation resulted in them deferring the decision for six weeks. It appears the unions have also been handed a poison chalice - the council agreed to give them £10,000 and 6 weeks to come up with an 'in house' alternative.

While the protests so far have stayed the councils hand, for now, an effective campaign needs to be built against attacks on services. Services used primarily by poor and working class communities.

International Women's Day

Celebrate Organise Resist

International Women's Day commemorates a strike, on March 8th 1857, of hundreds of women garment and textile workers in New York City protesting against low wages, long working hours, and inhumane working conditions. It is a day on which we proclaim the ongoing struggle for equality by and for women.

In Ireland one of the most significant areas of struggle for equality takes place around the fight for access to free, safe and legal abortion - north and south. In the north while women now make up almost half of the workforce women's work is disproportionately in part-time and poorly paid jobs. Working class women are severely effected by government austerity measures and cuts while having to manage the bulk of unpaid work in the home.

As well as celebrating women and the struggles we have won International Women's Day must also be a day on which we reaffirm our commitment to creating a better, truly equal, society. One free from patriarchy and capitalist exploitation.

In the short term we must join together with other working class people in the struggle against government attacks and for free, safe and legal abortion on demand.



Short Shrift

With the regular chaos that is the A&E at the Royal Victoria Hospital since the closure of the City Hospital A&E it, sadly, comes as no surprise that 5 patients died last year at the Royal Victoria Hospital as a result of cuts.

Warnings from workers and campaigners that cuts to the health service would cost lives have been ignored by Stormont. The findings of the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority also found that management refused to provide proper staffing levels and noted serious incidences of bullying staff.

As cuts to our health service continue more lives will be lost as a result. As part of the ongoing campaign against cuts the City Hospital A&E should be re-opened immediately.

Meanwhile on 4th February Stormont MLA's overwhelmingly voted to pass a Bill that robs the pensions of 250,000 workers and increases retirement age to 68. The Bill was passed by 77 votes to 13.

The Public Service Pensions Bill means that public service workers will have to work years longer and still come out with a much reduced pension! Like the faithful and strong workhorse Boxer in George Orwell's Animal Farm public servants who were promised better pensions and retirement at 60 are now being worked longer for less. It appears the pigs at Stormont want to work us until, like Boxer, we literally drop.



Pray Away The Gay? No Way!

Early morning of Saturday 18th January, the rain and cold would have kept most in their beds, but around 50 people trekked out to Ballynahinch to demonstrate against the reparative (or gay conversion) therapy conference in the local Baptist church.

The conference was called Setting Love in Order and was arranged by a number of Christian organisations aiming to turn people 'ex-gay', or at least talk about doing so. They were meeting because they felt their 'rights' were under threat, their rights to deem anyone who does not fit their narrow, bigoted and dangerous definition of correct sexuality as ill and in need of treatment.

This excuse for religious attacks under the guise of psychological counselling is little more than a place for religious parents to throw their outed teens to 'fix' them, or for evangelical adults to have their own religiously induced feelings of guilt and shame shaped into a faux-love for the opposite sex.

This is nothing short of abuse and all medical and psychological bodies that I know of have said essentially that. To make even more of a point, last year the largest 'ex-gay' group, Exodus International, disbanded and apologised to members of the LGBTQ+ community for, "…the pain and hurt many of you have experienced," as a result of their practices. They also said that what they'd been doing had never worked and that no one had ever been 'cured', exemplified by the fact that their president, Alan Chambers, came out as still being gay.

In Ballynahinch the protest was populated by The Rainbow Project, Cara-Friend, Here NI, a myriad of political parties and unions, as well as SolFed Belfast and many autonomous individuals, all willing to get soaking wet and hoarse voices from the chanting, while outnumbering those in the church hall and presenting a visible opposition to a few cameras and media outlets, as well as the passing public who seemed to show their support.

In fact we were greeted, thanked and briefly joined by a few passing parishioners who wanted to make it clear that the decision to hold the conference in their church was very much a decision of the church elders and a few influential members, and had once again split the congregation.

So this seems to have been a small collection of bigots who sat in a room and patted each other on the back for being homophobic, while crying that they weren't able to do anything about it, and who were drown out by a larger group of LGBTQ+ people and allies. Next up, the bigots in office…

Deadly Distractions Stormont, OTRs and The Real Crisis

With austerity, welfare reform, increased poverty and misery for working class communities across the north, cuts and more cuts looming the latest 'big story' has been OTRs and threats to collapse the Assembly from the DUP.

Revelations of deals made by Tony Blair's government relating to on-the-run 'terrorists' had First Minister Peter Robinson up in arms, well, mouthing off about this injustice. Effective amnesties negotiated for OTRs was a secret deal too far and undermined, well, everything the Assembly and power-sharing had been built on.

The facts are however, that any secret deal on OTRs has been public knowledge for at least 7 years. In 2007 the Belfast Telegraph ran an article of Blair's political manoeuvring (lies by any other name) on the issue. Gerry Kelly has recently confirmed that Sinn Fein were told 187 OTRs would not be pursued by the police while the DUP were assured that they would be hauled before the courts if caught. Of course there was no official statement.

Now the DUP may not have been told 'officially' but they knew what the reality was as well as anyone. Of course no official knowledge allows them to put on a show of indignation. The flipside is Sinn Fein also have a wee boost for their republican 'street-cred' by reminding republicans what they achieved for OTRs.

There is of course nothing accidental about any of this. Nor did it end in any real collapse of the power-sharing executive at Stormont. It simply suits both the DUP and Sinn Fein to pretend to fight it out on old familiar territory and provide a distraction from the real issues. Those issues are the 'austerity' measures they are both involved in implementing. Measures they have no intentions of opposing.

Concerns have been voiced however that at some point they may provoke an Orange-Green distraction to collapse the Assembly deliberately. After a brief period of direct rule allowing Westminster to impose the attacks they can go back to power-sharing with said 'issue' having shored up the support of their respective constituencies. All the Assembly parties would benefit from being able to point to Westminster as soup kitchens, homelessness, poverty and the death of working class people relentlessly increases in step with the rest of the UK. We suffer and they shift the blame. Sounds all too familiar, doesn't it?

ATOS Lose Contract Government Still In Power



UNITE Community members picket of Atos offices in Belfast 17th February, days before the loss of it's contract was announced.

As the company hated for implementing the governments attacks on the most vulnerable in our society is quitting its contract the attacks are set to continue.

Atos administered a programme that found people with terminal cancer or severe multiple sclerosis fit for work! 1,300 people have died after being declared fit for work.

While the withdrawal from implementing these assessments for the DWP is evidence of the results of successful campaigning it is only the start. Welfare reform and attacks on claimants is ongoing and must continue to be opposed until we force the government to scrap them.



NIC-ICTU Demanding The Impossible

On Friday 31st January NIC-ICTU held a rally to demand that the politicians sort things out.

Exasperated by on-going sectarianism hundreds turned out for what, unfortunately, was another bang-your-head-against-a-brick-wall rally. NIC-ICTU's Rally for Peace, Progress & Equality (can't argue with the name) took place at Belfast City Hall.

During the usual format of half hour lunchtime listening to speeches then back to work the rally was addressed by Claire Hackett (community worker) Ruairi Creaney (ICTU youth sec), Fiona McCausland (community worker & human rights activist) and Peter Bunting (NIC-ICTU sec).

Union members and others gathered to hear bureaucrats ask politicians to end their political stalemate, as their time-wasting is costing money, jobs and causing strife amongst communities. We would argue that their very existence is costing money, jobs and strife.

Peter Bunting, addressed the crowd with the type of stuff people expected him to say and the stuff some people want to hear:

> *We, the people, demand that action be taken to end political stalemate, to end all violence and to end inter-communal strife*
>
> *We are convinced that the people of Northern Ireland would like to see the NI Assembly concentrate on delivering decent public services, like schools and hospitals, while facilitating more and better jobs, especially for our young people. We want an economy that works for all.*

Sounds great. Great but completely detached from reality. The union leadership are demanding the impossible!

The parties in the Stormont Executive depend on sectarianism for their very existence. Getting rid of sectarianism would be getting rid of themselves. They are also concentrating on public services like schools and hospitals - by implementing cuts and austerity measures!

We, as working class people, demand that action be taken against the political state, to end all violence and to end inter-communal strife.

We are convinced that the working class people of Northern Ireland would like to see the assembly concentrate on things we want to see, like giving the people back the money they didn't earn and taking a long walk off a short pier. We want a society that works for all of us.

Crisis in the Ukraine

"No War Between 'Nations' - No Peace Between Classes!"



Russia's deployment of troops in Crimea, formerly an 'autonomous' region of the Ukraine, has caused much consternation to the USA and fear of escalating conflict for working class people throughout the region.

This came in the wake of a rightwing and fascist 'revolution', supported by the west, that saw control of the Ukrainian state being taken by hard-line nationalists, the far right Svoboda party and the paramilitary Right Sector. The political upheaval, and the fears of ethnic Russian's in the Ukraine, gave Putin's regime the opportunity:

> *to implement their long-standing imperial and expansionist aspirations in the Crimea and eastern Ukraine where it has strong economic, financial and political interests (from the Declaration of Internationalists against the war in Ukraine).*

Upwards of 6,000 Russian troops have been deployed in Crimea, the Ukrainian military have been deployed and reservists called up.

Some responses to Russia's invasion and western interference in the region from the 'left' seems to either imagine Russia as the USSR facing down US imperialism or describe Russia as a 'former power eager for a piece of the pie'. This betrays wilful misreading of the situation and an extremely crude understanding of what imperialism actually is. While the USSR is no more (to the inexplicable dismay of some on the 'left') Russia does not represent a 'former power'. It is the major imperialist economic and military power in the region.

Much of Europe's economy is also highly dependent on Russia. As a result the US looks unlikely to get support even for economic sanctions.

On the ground Ukrainian and Russian nationalism have been whipped up, the new Ukrainian government immediately attacked Russian and other minority language rights and there have been armed clashes between nationalist groups. While Kiev has installed a reactionary pro-western government the:

> *political elite of Crimea and eastern Ukraine does not intend to share their power and property with the next in turn Kiev rulers (ibid)*

and are instead placing their faith in the Russian government.

Those who will pay for any escalation of this conflict, those who have paid so far, have and will be the regions working class, no matter their ethnicity:

> *Warring cliques of bosses, as usual, force us ordinary people to fight for their interests: wage workers, unemployed, students, pensioners... Making us drunkards of the nationalist drug, they set us against each other, causing us to forget about our real needs and interests: we don't and can't care about their "nations". We are concerned with more vital and pressing problems – how to make ends meet in the system which they found to enslave and oppress us.*
>
> *We will not succumb to nationalist intoxication. To hell with their state and "nations", their flags and offices! This is not our war, and we should not take part, paying with our blood for their palaces, bank accounts and the pleasure to sit in soft chairs of authorities. And if the bosses in Moscow, Kiev, Lviv, Kharkiv, Donetsk and Simferopol start this war, our duty is to resist it by all available means!*
>
> *NO WAR BETWEEN "NATIONS" - NO PEACE BETWEEN CLASSES!"*

The Solidarity Federation is a revolutionary union initiative: an organisation of workers which seeks the abolition of capitalism and the state. Capitalism because it exploits, oppresses and kills working people and wrecks the environment for profit worldwide. The state because it can only maintain hierarchy and privilege for those who control and their servants; it cannot be used to fight the oppression and exploitation that are the consequences of hierarchy and the source of privilege. In their place we want a society based on workers' self-management, solidarity, mutual aid and libertarian communism.

That society can be achieved by working class organisations based on the same principles - revolutionary unions. These are not trade unions concerned with "bread and butter" issues like pay and conditions. Revolutionary unions are means for working people to organise and fight all the issues - both in the workplace and beyond - which arise from our oppression.

As such we are actively opposed to sectarianism, racism, sexism and homophobia and other tendencies used to divide workers and weaken our struggles for our common interests.

Revolutionary unions fully support and encourage organisation in all spheres of life that consciously parallel those of the society we wish to create; that is, organisation based on mutual aid, voluntary cooperation, direct democracy and opposed to domination, hierarchy and exploitation in all forms. We are committed to building a new society within the shell of the old in both our workplace and wider community. Unless we organise in this way, politicians - some claiming to be revolutionary - will be able to exploit us for their own ends.

The Solidarity Federation consists of Locals and Industrial Networks which seek to take on the functions of revolutionary unions - supporting our organising efforts where we live and work. Our activities are based on direct action - action by workers ourselves, not through intermediaries like politicians and union officials; our decisions are made through participation of the membership. We welcome all workers - including the unemployed, retired, stay-home parents and students - who will work within our Aims and Principles and seek to create revolutionary unions to fight the class struggle.