

The politics of climate change

In a world awash with struggles and issues – from Ecuador to Hong Kong, Catalonia to Kashmir, austerity and war to racism and sexism, not to mention Brexit – the overarching global issue is climate change. This question and how we respond to it will determine the future of humanity. In addition to this objective fact we are also witnessing a growing international climate action movement. The Fridays 4 Future and School student strikes on 20 and 27 September were spectacular globally and in some places produced astonishing levels of mobilisation eg half a million in Montreal and about 170,000 in tiny New Zealand (not to mention 30,000 or so in Dublin) . Then there was Extinction Rebellion Week 2 which brought into action, including open civil disobedience, many thousands in London and many hundreds in Dublin along with numerous other actions across the world.

In these circumstances it is hardly surprising that climate change and the environmental crisis provides the central focus for this issue of Irish Marxist Review. We begin with ‘Apocalypse now – climate change, capitalism and revolution’ which offers an overview of the immense and urgent challenge facing us all and presents an argument that while every immediate demand should be fought for a socialist revolution will be necessary to rise to that challenge. This is followed by a forensic dissection of the Irish Government’s hopelessly inadequate Climate Plan by Eddie Conlon. Those, like most existing governments and to some extent the IPCC, who are unwilling to challenge the fossil fuel companies or the priorities of capitalism, often look to a technological fix to escape the crisis. Owen McCormack, in a carefully argued article, demonstrates that this is an illusion.

If climate change is the main ultimate

threat it is far from being the only environmental crisis we are facing. As Mark Walsh shows in his powerful article on ‘The scourge of air pollution’, air quality is a mass killer both globally and here in Ireland. In Ireland it is estimated to claim upwards of 1,200 lives per annum and is particularly dangerous for young children and the elderly. Moreover, it is striking that the main solutions to the problem turn out to be very much the same as the measures necessary to combat climate change e.g. free and expanded public transport to reduce traffic levels , retrofitting of homes and planting of more trees .In a very interesting alternative take on the climate emergency Alexandra Day in ‘Climate apartheid in Palestine’ shows how this issue impacts profoundly on what is already established as one of the crucial struggles in the world today. This is important because what is true for Palestine will also apply to innumerable other class and liberation struggles in a warming world – Sudan, Egypt, Bangladesh, Bolivia, Puerto Rico and the Caribbean are obvious examples.

Taken as a whole what all these five articles demonstrate is that climate change is an intensely political issue. In this context, therefore, I want to make a few observations about Extinction Rebellion’s claim to be ‘beyond politics’. I should first make clear that there is nothing new in this; almost every new campaign about every issue claims that the question is beyond or above politics. Getting rid of nuclear weapons, opposing war, fighting racism, stopping water charges, campaigning for a woman’s right to choose, defending hospitals and health services; all these, and many other issues, can plausibly be represented as being about ‘basic human rights’ or ‘basic human welfare and survival’ and therefore non-political

or above politics but in reality none of them turn out to be so. The beyond politics claim relies on a very narrow understanding of politics as essentially just the electoral and parliamentary game played by establishment parties. In reality ‘politics’ is the entire question of how society is run – globally, nationally and locally - by whom, with what priorities and in whose interests. Therefore no major issue is or can be non-political.

Of course if what the ‘beyond politics’ claim means is simply that XR (like other campaigns) should not be affiliated to, or owned or monopolised by, any one party then that is straightforward and it is hard to imagine anyone being foolish enough to propose this. But if it means XR can avoid political issues, political debates, political decisions and taking political sides then this is a mistake. On the contrary EVERY strategic decision it takes (and many a tactical one) is political in the wider sense: for example the basic decisions to be non-violent, to focus on mass civil disobedience as the emphasis on getting arrested. One of the most fundamental issues facing XR, as it faces every movement, is deciding who are its allies or potential allies and who are its main antagonists. Are the mass of ordinary people, what socialists call the working class, potentially – and ultimately necessarily – the movement’s main allies and constituency or is it the ‘enlightened middle class’ or even the corporate bosses and the top politicians?

This is a political choice dependent on political analysis of society and has immediate political consequences in the struggle. If one sees the main target audience – the main people you want to win over – as the powerful people at the top then the Fianna Fail Mayor coming to greet you is a major coup and marching into the IFSC is a big mistake. If you

4 | are trying to reach working class people occupying Penneys, or sitting atop tube trains in Canning Town in London, is probably not a good idea.

Of course some people will reject all this by saying we don't recognise these distinctions, we treat everyone from the Taoiseach and the CEO of Shell to the single mother in Penneys or Tesco as the same : we are all in it together and all equally responsible. But this is a false egalitarianism which does not correspond at all to the reality of climate change, either in terms of its causes or its effects, and in practice favours the powerful. It would be far more beneficial for the climate movement as a whole and XR in particular to grasp that the main drivers of climate change are the giant corporations and their state partners and that the main drivers of resistance and change will be the mass of ordinary people - workers, trade unions, school students, people of colour and of the Global South, indigenous peoples and so on. This is not because of the ideas currently in their heads but

because of where their interests lie. The former have an immense vested interest in fossil fuels and profit, the latter in stopping climate change and defending the environment.

In terms of the political spectrum the parties and politicians of the establishment and the right i.e. in Ireland Fianna Fail and Fine Gael, and internationally Trump, Johnson and the Tories, Bolsonaro and Orban along with Macron and Putin and the rest – will be opponents of the movement because they are wedded to those corporations and states while the left, broadly speaking, will be its friends and allies. And this will be true no matter how sweetly Paschal Donohoe smiles at XR protestors or Leo Varadkar applauds the school strikes or the UN welcomes Greta Thunberg. Politicians, in this regard, have to be judged first and foremost by what they do, not just what they say. But let's be clear, all this is based on political analysis and political judgment. Politics in this sense is inescapable. The climate change issue can no more be beyond

politics than it can be beyond gravity.

Naturally climate change is not the only question we address in this issue. Irish Marxist Review has a long standing commitment to exploring Irish history and here we publish two studies of important figures in the history of 20th century Ireland: Kieran Allen on Michael Collins and Alan Byrne on Charlie Haughey. The analysis of wider aspects of Irish society is also a task for us and we are pleased to publish Somhairle Mag Uidhir's path breaking article on 'The GAA in Crisis'. As mentioned above Kashmir is one of many flashpoints in the world today and we are delighted to include a personal memoir of Kashmir under occupation by an expatriate Kashmiri student. Earlier this year in IMR 23 we published 'Conversation with a poet' featuring emerging poet Ciarán O'Rourke. Now we follow up on this with three new poems by this outstanding talent. Finally we have reviews of books on fascinating topics: Alexandra Kollontai, Percy Shelley and the Irish Citizen Army.

John Molyneux
