

44 | Workers, resistance and Covid-19

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“It is a miracle he is alive. He lost a world of weight – 13 kilos. He has to learn to walk again. It will take a good twelve months to come back. He was walking on a Zimmer frame up and down the ward. His breathing is all different. There are no plans for him to return to work at Rosderra. I wouldn’t let him back in a million years.”

So says the wife of a meat plant worker, in the *Irish Times* of 16 May.¹ At that point there were almost 600 cases of Covid-19 in meat plants. By the middle of the following week there were 850 cases and by June 3rd, 1,048.

Despite high levels of infection in Rosderra, we learn the company was never advised to cease production by the Health and Safety Authority (HSA). The chief executive of the HSA says, “Closing down would be... very extreme... the whole situation would have to be extremely critical...to do that, but there are lots of points in between.” But the “points in between” did not even include inspecting these plants as it subsequently emerged that, by mid-May, not one HSA inspection had taken place in meat plants (or anywhere else) despite complaints being made to them.² This was not surprising. I argued at the beginning of May that “no state agency will take responsibility for ensuring even minimal levels of worker safety.”³

Despite calls from Migrant Rights Centre that the plants be closed for two weeks for a deep clean, SIPTU called for a taskforce “involving all meat industry stakeholders”⁴ – a clear preference for social partnership over real action to prevent workers being exposed.

This is a trend in Ireland and around the globe and illustrates some of the key lessons to be drawn from this crisis. Capitalism is a brutal system that will put profits before the lives of workers. The neo-liberal state, with its commitment to light touch regulations, will put few

impediments in its way. And the top layers of the trade unions will do little to challenge the employers, leaving workers to their own devices in resisting the privileging of profit over their lives.⁵

But globally workers have shown great bravery, creativity and defiance in fighting back, graphically demonstrated by walkouts at meat plant in the North.⁶ I want to argue, that despite the awfulness of the current crises, which has disproportionately affected working and poor people, including frontline workers who struggled to save lives, new opportunities have opened up to reverse the decline in the power of organised workers. Workers are thinking anew about the need to get organised in the face of employer indifference to their health. There is also a wider acknowledgment of the vital role that many low paid and frontline workers play in society. To benefit from this, we need an orientation focused on building strong militant workplace unions, which embrace some of the new methods that have been used during the crisis, rather than another bout of social partnership which the union leaders are pushing for.

They just don’t care!

It’s possible to argue, even from a Marxist perspective, that there is not always a collision between the requirement for profits and the safety of workers.⁷ Despite the fact that every year hundreds of thousands of workers routinely die of work-related accidents and illnesses, the level of risk that different workers face is shaped by the accumulation strategies of their employers, the degree of state regulation and the extent to which workers can enforce safety on the job. There may be a coincidence of interest between accumulation and safety, whereby improvement in safety may go hand in hand with improvement in profit, particularly when a major disaster or a record of consistent accidents and injuries may disrupt the production process or make it

hard to recruit employees.⁸

While there may be variance in how safety is treated across different companies, the current crisis has generated a high level of risk across *the economy as a whole* questioning whether it is safe to go to work at all.⁹ As three Italian academics put it:

“The problem of health and safety emerged in all its sharpness as an issue of general interest when, due to the risk of biological contagion from Coronavirus, *the simple act of physically going to work suddenly became a potentially deadly source of risk for the whole workforce*, and not just for those usually unseen minorities working in particularly dangerous occupations.”¹⁰

This increasing level of risk was not matched in Italy by “an effective universality of protection against it”. This could be said about many other places too where the clash between keeping business going and protecting the lives of workers turned the issue of achieving an effective lockdown into an objective of class struggle.

It was perhaps in Italy¹¹ that this struggle was most intense with employers resisting the shutdown of the economy; the government agreeing to a weak form of lockdown leaving millions of workers at work; the trade union leaders moving cautiously and slowly, fearful of being too confrontational at a time of national crisis, and agreeing an ineffective protocol with the government before then being met by a revolt from below.¹²

With wildcat strikes breaking out “in many factories and logistics warehouses” the government finally agreed to closing non-essential activities on March 21st. Even then the struggle continued on the ground, as many employers did not enforce agreed safety standards, “with the extant levels of organisation in workplaces” becoming a key factor in ensuring compliance. But there was also evidence of unorganised workers, such as Deliveroo riders, taking action too. The grassroots union S.I. Cobas played a significant role in the mobilisations in logistics.¹³

Employers in the South of Ireland were also resistant to a complete lockdown. At every turn they contested what should be regarded as “essential”. This was particularly so in construction with the leaders of the industry (CIF) insisting that work should continue on building sites, despite considerable evidence that social distancing could not be practiced. On the day (March

29th) following the publication of the long list of services deemed essential by the Irish Government, a Facebook post from a worker at Bosch and Lomb in Waterford, which has 900 workers and makes contact lenses, said that it was still open. The company is “offering overtime... allowing people to cross over shifts increasing the risk of transmission”. Data from the CSO and Central Bank suggests that much of manufacturing remained open. A CSO survey reported that 85% of Industry Enterprises continued to trade¹⁴ while a detailed analysis by Central Bank economists showed that 14% of manufacturing workers were on the Pandemic Unemployment Payment compared to 25% of all workers, 71% in Accommodation & Food and 54% in Construction.¹⁵ This is evidence that many workers were expected, as one Italian activist put it, to live a “double life: on weekends they can’t even go for a walk in the park. But on Mondays they have to go back to work and come into contact with hundreds of workers”.¹⁶

As soon as they could employers wanted to shift the terms of the debate from saving lives to getting the wheels of business turning again. In a truly remarkable interview, on April 25th, Danny McCoy, the head of Ireland’s big employers’ organisation (IBEC), said:

“the term “essential” might not be appropriate when it comes to reopening Ireland. One criteria [for reopening] would be *that labour-intensive industries would become more essential to get people back to work* to deal with the economic problem. The idea of getting mass groups back to work, while it might seem counter-intuitive from a public health dimension, *is very important for the economic problem we have.*” (emphasis added).¹⁷

The recklessness of McCoy’s approach was evidenced by the rising numbers of cases in labour intensive meat plants where “people are on top of each other”.¹⁸ There was evidence, in late March, that some employers were intensifying their rate of production in anticipation of closure and exposing workers to greater risk.¹⁹ The crisis in meat plants was a direct result of a global trend that has seen increased consolidation and concentration and a push for greater productivity. Conditions in the industry were ripe for the spread of the virus with a few big companies, operating larger plants and using poorly paid migrant workers living in communal housing.²⁰ The industry in Ireland is dominated by just eight

families who form part of the elite of Irish society.²¹ It is unsurprising that the state effectively did nothing to stop production during the crisis.

Fighting back

While the opposition of employers to lockdown and the hesitancy of union leaders to push for it was also evident in Ireland (on March 24th, the ICTU issued a joint letter with the CIF to construction workers advising them to practice social distancing and “carry out regular hand washing and use gloves and masks *if possible*”) an Italian style push from below did not materialise. This is despite evidence from other countries that employer disregard for safety was leading to a shift in workers’ attitudes. Workers who, in the past, may have feared employer retaliation if they organised were reevaluating that risk. As an organiser from the US communications workers’ union puts it:

“Covid-19 has turned some of that calculus on its ear. Yeah, maybe the boss will hold it against me. Maybe this will put my job in jeopardy. But I am not going to put my life or my new-born’s life or my immuno-compromised parent’s life in danger”.²²

While at this stage a full account of the extent of workers’ resistance is still not possible²³ this change in attitude has led to a significant amount of action and a belief that there is a growing willingness by workers to engage with unions and to use old and new innovative methods to take on the boss.

So, as well as the extensive activity in Italy, we find accounts of rising activity and increasing membership in the USA, the UK and elsewhere²⁴. Jane Slaughter²⁵ has categorised the great variety of actions that have taken place in the USA while another account *usefully* describes “an extraordinary surge of anger and activism nationwide as workers have protested what they consider inadequate safety precautions: at meatpacking plants, McDonalds, Amazon, bus depots and grocery stores”.²⁶ In Britain we find an increasing willingness to engage with unions, with the National Education Union reporting that its membership grew by 7,500 over one weekend, and traffic on the TUC’s joining page was up 300%.²⁷

A theme is the manner in which unorganised workers used social media to coordinate effective action from below, with a great example being the May Day Strike

across Amazon, Instacart, Whole Food and Target in the US due to a blatant disregard for workers’ lives from companies who continued to make huge profits through the crisis. A flavour of this action is captured in the following:

“The so-called “May Day General Strike” is the culmination of a series of strikes led by workers at companies like Whole Foods, Amazon and Instacart since the pandemic began. The organizers at the forefront of the recent labour unrest form the face of the country’s resurgent labour movement: non-union, underemployed, and precarious workers who have taken things into their own hands to demand changes and organize their co-workers in the absence of a union – primarily over social media and encrypted messaging apps like Signal and Telegram.”²⁸

We shouldn’t overstate the extent of resistance. Slaughter reminds us that “the vast majority of workers in the U.S. were shell-shocked” but it is possible to argue that the changing calculus referred above is changing attitudes to unions and opening up opportunities for organising.

Superheroes

The other big opportunity that has opened up relates to those frontline workers who continued to work through the crisis and became the subject of weekly clapping and other demonstrations of support. In a sense public consciousness awoke to the simple fact that workers make the world go round, and that many of these workers are lowly paid and undervalued.

For example, those working in supermarkets,²⁹ ensuring we all had enough to eat and drink, work in a sector where earnings are 25% below median earnings. 44% of workers in this sector are low paid and, like many private sector workers, are unlikely to be paid sick pay as there is no statutory requirement to do so. Workers in the private sector must wait for six days (the average in the EU is three) before being paid anything in state benefit of €203 per week.³⁰

Many of these workers continued to work generating huge profits as sales of groceries reached record levels. They continued to work in workplaces where their safety was not prioritised, with *MANDATE*, the shop worker’s union, reporting on April 23rd that almost half

of workers said social distancing was not being adhered to. In the big multiples *MANDATE* was able to push for a 10% bonus for working in these hazardous conditions.

Ireland has the third highest level of low pay in the OECD. The growing recognition of the plight of these and other low paid workers, such as the many health and support workers who allowed our hospitals to function, some giving their lives in the process,³¹ has created the basis for a serious push for a Living Wage of €15, and at a minimum, payment of sick pay from the first day of illness at the rate of €350 which was paid for those on Covid-19 related sick leave.

No to social partnership

Whether these opportunities will be built on is an open question. The crisis has exposed the deep problems facing workers and the workers' movement here. There has been some action, mainly in the North, with walkouts in meat plants.³² But in reality, the response to the Covid-19 crisis and the threats to workers' health and livelihoods has been muted, reflecting a lack of confidence on the ground. It didn't help that some unions effectively shut up shop, with UNITE for example suspending all meetings.

The lack of confidence was clear to those of us working on the People Before Profit Workers' Helpline. There was no lack of grievances (indeed the Free Legal Advice Service reported a doubling of workers' rights queries during the pandemic)³³ but a strong sense that little could be done about them.

This is a direct result of decades of social partnership and a deliberate strategy by the state and union bureaucracy to tame strong workplace unions following what was a "Decade of Upheaval" in the 1960s.³⁴ There is a remarkable contrast between the growth and militancy of the movement between 1960 and 1980 and its weakness now. In that twenty year period membership rose by 70% and density by a quarter to 62%. Union membership now stands at 24% overall and about 15% in the private sector. In 2019 there were just nine strikes, the average since 2012. In comparison there were 132 in 1980 of which 81 were unofficial, reflecting strong independent workplace organisation.³⁵

The long period of social partnership was used to strengthen the power of the ICTU and the union bureaucracy. Given the requirement to get all unions to

sign up to national agreements there has been a process of rationalising the number of unions and undermining internal democracy within them to ensure the outcome of national negotiations were accepted. Crucially, in contrast to the pay agreements of the 1970s, the possibilities for workplace bargaining, which played an important role in building a layer of militant shop stewards, was removed. In addition, the unions allowed a significant non-union sector to emerge, agreed to the 1990 Industrial Relations Act which seriously impedes effective industrial action, and did not launch any serious campaign for mandatory union recognition.³⁶ Further, no serious opposition was mounted to austerity following the financial crisis and the wholesale attacks on pay and conditions.

As workers face another bout of austerity, the strategy of the ICTU will be to resuscitate social partnership. Fine documents (from ICTU and UNITE)³⁷ have emerged from the left and right of the bureaucracy, which rightly argue that we can't go back to what we had before; that workers' rights and workers' voice must be improved along with the social wage; and that employers must pay more taxes. All well and good. But neither indicate that any significant campaign will be launched to achieve these objectives and we are told by ICTU that

"We are convinced that a reformed LEEF (Labour Employer Economic Forum)³⁸ in the Republic of Ireland and a permanent Engagement Forum in Northern Ireland are needed, now more than ever. And we are equally convinced that a deeper engagement with unions must be part of a broader inclusive process encompassing proper dialogue with civil society (and) more participatory decision-making".³⁹

The contrast between this desire to sit down and make peace with the bosses stands in stark contrast to what happening on the ground. As the lockdown unwinds workers are facing pay cuts and job losses. The most significant Covid-19 related dispute in the South has been in Debenhams where almost 1,500 workers were laid off when the eleven shops were put into liquidation. Despite the restrictions of Covid-19, luke-warm support from their union and police harassment and intimidation, the shop stewards have led a magnificent campaign to save as many jobs as possible and for enhanced redundancy pay. Effectively

using social media and Zoom they have generated huge public support and a fighting spirit among the workers, with the aim of forcing Debenhams and the liquidator to deal with them. A strike has also started at Upright in City West again aimed at stopping redundancies. These disputes have taken on huge significance given the prospect of an avalanche of redundancies, with unemployment heading towards 17% for the year. It was 5% in 2019. It is clear now that we face a major fight to stop another bout of austerity and it is not at all clear that the trade union leadership are up for leading this fight.

Nice documents are not enough

The Covid-19 crisis has created opportunities to begin to rebuild the workers' movement. I have argued that the calculus about joining a union may be changing and that there is significant support for improving the lot of low paid frontline workers. I don't want to suggest that it will be easy to rebuild our movement but, although we face another bout of austerity, we should not be too defensive about our demands if we are to take seriously the idea that there is no going back.

We need to build on these opportunities to recruit members, build workplace strength and launch a significant campaign for a Living Wage and mandatory union recognition. We must also build a solidarity network to support those prepared to fight. In order to do so we need to understand that the trade union bureaucracy, committed to social partnership, are incapable of building on these opportunities. It's not possible to build the kind of militancy we require in the current situation and at the same time want to make peace with the boss. It's hard to recruit people to unions if you keep telling them the boss is their partner.⁴⁰

Writing grand documents will not stop the onslaught of austerity. Rather we need to take inspiration from the combativity that has been demonstrated around the globe and build a movement that will fight using old and new methods, and which engages seriously with the creativity and demands of young people for real change in their working lives. It's only by beginning to build such a movement that we can seriously resist austerity. This is a task to which the left must give urgent priority.

Notes

1 <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/health/inside-a-covid-19-outbreak-at-a-meat-plant-it-is-a-miracle-he-is-alive-1.4254525?mode=sample&auth-failed=1&pw-origin=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.irishtimes.com%2Fnews%2Fhealth%2Finside-a-covid-19-outbreak-at-a-meat-plant-it-is-a-miracle-he-is-alive-1.4254525>

2 See <https://www.rte.ie/news/2020/0520/1139453-coronavirus-meat-industry/>

3 Conlon, E. (2020b) Defend the Lockdown: Protect Workers' Lives. *Rebel News*. <http://www.rebelnews.ie/2020/05/06/defend-the-lockdown-protect-workers-lives/>

4 <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/covid-19-testing-centre-for-families-of-meat-plant-workers-planned-1.4254775>

5 See Conlon, E (2020) Covid-19: Workers Strike Back, *Rebel News*. <http://www.rebelnews.ie/2020/04/04/striking-back-protecting-workers-lives/> where I provide other examples to illustrate this pattern.

6 See Conlon (2020) for examples

7 See Pearce, F. and Tombs, S. (1998). *Toxic Capitalism*. Dartmouth: Ashgate. Or

Nichols, T. (1997). *The Sociology of Industrial Injury*. London: Mansell.

8 See Conlon, E. (2019). "Prisoners of the Capitalist Machine: Captivity and the Corporate Engineer" in Christensen et al. *The Engineering-Business Nexus*, Springer.

9 See Conlon (2020b)

10 A. Tassinari, R.E. Chesta, L. Cini (2020) "Labour conflicts over health and safety in the Italian Covid19 crisis" *Interface* 22 May 2020 <https://www.interfacejournal.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Tassinari-Chesta-Cini.pdf>

11 We are still at an early stage but there seems to be more analysis of worker struggles coming out of Italy. .See Tassinari, Chesta & Cini (2020) and also <http://column.global-labour-university.org/2020/03/covid-19-labour-movement-struggles-to.html#moreandhttps://www.marx21.de/corona-crisis-italia-strikes-union-eliana-como-workers/?fbclid=IwAR1fpoNoiFr2RgE-dOXH6Fm57mGTmV-UbPiUrM-18cUlfE5OEemXdaOyJZMQ>

12 Tassinari, Chesta & Cini (2020)

13 Tassinari, Chesta & Cini (2020)

14 <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/bic19/businessimpactofcovid-19survey20aprilto3may2020/>

15 Stephen Byrne, Dermot Coates, Enda Keenan & Tara McIndoe-Calder(2020) "The Initial Labour Market Impact of COVID-19". *Central Bank Economic Letter*, Vol 2020, No. 4.

16 <https://www.marx21.de/corona-crisis-italia-strikes-union-eliana-como-workers/?fbclid=IwAR1fpoNoiFr2RgE-dOXH6Fm57mGTmV-UbPiUrM18cUlfE5OEemXdaOyJZMQ>

- 17 <https://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/lifting-the-lockdown-what-are-the-plans-1.4236891>
- 18 <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/may/01/covid-19-outbreaks-at-irish-meat-plants-raise-fears-over-worker-safety>
- 19 <https://www.mrci.ie/2020/03/27/migrant-rights-centre-ireland-mrci-calls-for-health-and-safety-measures-in-the-agri-food-industry-to-be-upheld/>
- 20 See Moody, K. (2017). *On New Terrain*, Haymarket Books. Chapter 4 and <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/may/11/chaotic-and-crazy-meat-plants-around-the-world-struggle-with-virus-outbreaks>
- 21 <https://www.independent.ie/business/farming/beef-barons-worth-over-2billion-34475145.html>
- 22 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/06/us-union-activism-spikes-amid-coronavirus>
- 23 In early April I attempted to capture the extent of action at that time. See Conlon (2020)
- 24 In The US Labour Notes <https://labornotes.org/coronavirus-has-extensive-coverage-of-labour-unrest-during-covid-19-while-the-4th-international-s-website-world-socialist-website> https://www.wsws.org/en/topics/site_area/workers/ has a more global focus. See also Conlon (2020)
- 25 <https://labornotes.org/blogs/2020/05/pandemic-finding-new-and-old-ways-fight-new-and-old-foes>
- 26 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/06/us-union-activism-spikes-amid-coronavirus>
- 27 <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/may/20/lockdown-union-power-coronavirus>
- 28 https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/n7j8zw/amazon-whole-foods-instacart-workers-organize-a-historic-mass-strike
- 29 For more on this issues see Conlon, E. (2020a) Value Shop Workers: Pay Them Properly, *Rebel News*, <http://www.rebelnews.ie/2020/04/09/value-shop-workers-pay-them-properly/> and Conlon (2020b).
- 30 For more on the low level of workers' rights in Ireland see <https://www.pbp.ie/policies/workers-rights/>
- 31 <https://www.thejournal.ie/tributes-covid-deaths-5076829-Apr2020/>
- 32 See Conlon (2020).
- 33 <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/coronavirus-increase-in-legal-queries-from-stressed-workers-1.4267957?mode=sample&auth-failed=1&pw-origin=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.irishtimes.com%2Fnews%2Fsocial-affairs%2Fcoronavirus-increase-in-legal-queries-from-stressed-workers-1.4267957>
- 34 See Mc Carthy, C. (1973). *The Decade of Upheaval*. Dublin, IPA.
- 35 See Gunnigle et al (1995) *Industrial Relations in Ireland*. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan. <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/id/industrialdisputesquarter12020/> https://researchrepository.ucd.ie/bitstream/10197/9907/2/irn_2018.pdf
- 36 See Conlon, E. (2002). Fighting partnership: The left and the unions. *Red Banner*, 13.
- 37 ICTU (2020) No Going Back. https://www.ictu.ie/download/pdf/no_going_back_final_document_may_2020.pdf
- UNITE (2020) HOPE OR AUSTERITY. <https://unitetheunion.org/media/3027/hope-or-austerity-a-roadmap-for-a-better-fairer-ireland-after-the-pandemic-v2.pdf>
- 38 This body was used to negotiate the "Return to Work Safety Protocol" and it is envisaged that it will play an ongoing role in monitoring the return to work. The ink was hardly dry on this protocol when ICTU, which was involved in negotiating it issued a statement saying "it is vital that the protocol is supported by an effective, enforcement regime". It emerged that no additional resources were to be given to the HSA to enforce it something you think they might have demanded in the talks. After all it was over 10 weeks into the crisis before anything was agreed with the government in relation to workplace safety. See <https://www.ictu.ie/press/2020/05/08/return-to-work-safely-protocol-patricia-king-state/> <https://www.pbp.ie/government-finally-acknowledges-that-workers-safety-must-be-protected/>
- 39 ICTU (2020). While not quite a call for social partnership I am unsure what to make of Brendan Ogle's call for "a vision for a collaborative society of 'togetherness', hope, and real fair and needed change." (UNITE 2020).
- 40 Conlon (2002).