

Brexit and the EU: Social Crisis in The Republic of Ireland

By [Tommy McKearney](#)

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The Brexit storm-clouds are gathering, and the political class in Dublin is in a tizzy. Having placed almost all its emphasis on the mantra of the “hard, militarised border and return to violence,” they will be deprived of any coherent argument when this fails to materialise.

The problem for the southern ruling class is not that the Belfast Agreement will fall apart as a result of Britain withdrawing from the European Union: their difficulty lies in the fact that continued membership of the EU will not address the underlying problems faced by a growing number of the Republic’s citizens; and this is something they wish to conceal.

While the governing coalition of Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil promotes a story of economic recovery, full employment, and prosperity, the reality for many is very different.

Homelessness and lack of access to satisfactory housing is a nightmare for thousands of citizens; yet the state refuses to address the matter. As with most infrastructural issues, this is a problem that will gradually go from bad to worse until it reaches stability-threatening crisis.

The health service is also in chaos. In spite of spending more per capita than most Western European countries, the Republic’s health service lurches from crisis to crisis in a seemingly unending cycle. Nevertheless the Government refuses to review its commitment to retaining an expensive and inefficient two-tier system that benefits paying customers over public patients.

Moreover, whatever protection was afforded by the trade union movement has been diminished since the introduction of the Industrial Relations Act (1990), the effect of which was illustrated recently when the High Court granted Ryanair an injunction preventing a strike by the airline’s pilots.

The Republic’s membership of the European Union is not the sole cause of this situation. The free-market comprador class now governing Ireland predates even the Common Market. Nevertheless they depend heavily for their privileged position and security on a continuing subservient relationship with neo-liberal Brussels. Not only does membership of the EU afford them a bogus prosperity narrative, it organises the bail-out (for which we, the people, pay) when their mismanagement and profligacy lead to meltdown. In return, of course, they ruthlessly apply the free-market agenda dictated by the Continental power-brokers.

It is this slavish adherence to a Thatcherite agenda of privatisation and commercialisation that prevents the southern state from building the necessary houses, creating a universal free health service, and providing a range of public services that would guarantee the well-

being of all its citizens.

With Britain now certain to leave the European Union, with or without a deal, attention will sooner or later return to conditions in Ireland as a whole. Not only will the issues referred to above come in for further scrutiny but there is every indication that the global economy is again faltering, and a significant downturn is in prospect.

Coupled with this is the political, economic and social stalemate in the Six Counties, aggravated by the age-old sore of partition. The Belfast Agreement no longer functions as “the light of the world, a city set on a hill . . .” as envisaged by its designers. While the agreement undoubtedly facilitated an ending to the armed conflict, it has failed to provide political agreement or a consensus on local governance.

The future of Northern Ireland as a political entity has rarely been so uncertain. Suspended institutions, changing demographics, sections of unionism’s farming and business community eager to retain easy access to the Republic’s markets, all contribute to a state in flux. And now there is the real prospect that Boris Johnson’s pursuit of a Little Englander agenda will lead to renewed demands for Scottish independence, something that would undermine Unionist confidence.

In the light of all this it is important for socialist republicanism to give serious consideration to a strategy for achieving its objective of a workers’ republic. Towards this end a number of issues have to be stated plainly.

One is to reassert unambiguously that continuing membership of the European Union will not, and indeed cannot, deliver social or economic justice for the people of this country. A second point that has to be hammered home is the one made by Connolly in his debate with William Walker: breaking the political connection with Britain remains an imperative if we are to make progress; and campaigning for an end to partition does not contradict our commitment to internationalism.[1]

It is important, therefore, to take a strong supportive position in the current discussions and campaigns to end partition and bring about political reunification. Such a stance is neither opportunistic nor nationalistic. It not only advances democracy in Ireland but also opens the door to progressive change.

Notwithstanding the turbulence created by armed conflict in the Six Counties, the political context in Ireland, on both sides of the border, remained unchanged for decades after the early 1920s. Three conservative parties shared government in the South throughout that period, while two equally conservative if not reactionary parties dominated politics in the North. On the surface it might be argued that this is still the case, with little sign of it being about to change. The DUP remains the largest party at the Stormont constituency level, while Leo Varadkar’s and Micheál Martin’s parties continue to dominate the Dáil.

For the reasons outlined above, the hold of these parties on power is not as secure as it once was. Nevertheless, the status quo will not crumble of its own accord, nor should we wait for an external crisis to effect change here. A global economic recession is highly probable but, in isolation, is just as likely to reinforce the right as it is to promote the left.

Moreover, how and when changes in the global economy take place is unpredictable and, by definition, beyond our control.

What socialist republicans should do is engage actively on those issues where we have influence and where we can exert a progressive effect. Battling to end the Industrial Relations Act, fighting north and south for public housing, campaigning against membership of the European Union are all important areas of struggle. However, overturning the constitutional status quo that has resisted the building of a workers' state has to remain high among our priorities.

With conditions being what they are at present, we could do worse than recall a phrase coined by Bobby Seale and *seize the time*.

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Note

[1] James Connolly wrote in *Forward* in July 1911: "Jaurès affirms, in the name of International Socialism, that the Socialists of a subject nation were and are not only in the right in voting for the national independence of their country, but in defending it with their lives if need be."

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