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The Nature of the Workers' Party

Workers' Party of Ireland

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1. THE NATURE OF THE WORKERS PARTY

1.1 In order to clarify the nature of the Workers Party, we need to address fundamental questions, e.g. Why does the Workers Party exist and for what purpose? Why does it exist in a particular form? Is this form the optimum for carrying out our purpose?

1.2 The Workers Party’s roots lie deep in the 200-years-old radical democratic tradition within Irish politics which has sought to assert the rights of the majority against minority elites.

1.3 The Party has been shaped by its consistent history of involvement in the struggles of ordinary people which has provided it with valuable organisational strengths.

1.4 It continually renews its analysis of society in the light of new developments and circumstances, bringing all possible new knowledge to bear on its assessments. It is an indigenous organisation whose political analysis derives from the realities of Irish society, but it has learned many lessons from both the mistakes and successes of political movements in other countries. It is increasingly in touch with Left organisations in Europe and sits with the Left Unity grouping in the European Parliament. Whether it continues to be comfortable there is just one of the many issues we have to address.

1.5 One of its key understandings, refined considerably by the availability of marxist tools of analysis, is that our entire society is structured by the interests of capital rather than those of ordinary people, that those structures are profoundly unequal, and that fundamental democratic changes across society must be underpinned by an economic order with very different priorities.

1.6 Its socialism is the logical development and extension of its democratic committment.

1.7 Today, the WP is the only substantial socialist party operative in Ireland. (The Irish Labour Party claims to be both socialist and social-democratic but would be generally regarded as the latter). Its public support is modest at 5% overall in the Republic, though this understates its actual influence because of the way in which that support is concentrated in certain areas. Our
influence might also be measured in terms of the pressures we can exert on other parties (e.g. keeping Labour out of coalition with FF after the last election). Its Northern Ireland support is somewhat less and is also more dispersed. The Workers Party is a long way from being the dominant political force in Irish society.

1.8 As well as drawing support from what would be considered its 'natural' (i.e. working class, narrowly defined) constituency, the Workers Party has built up a 'good-will' support among other classes because of its progressive policies on social issues. Would it be true to say that our membership comes increasingly from the latter sector while our voters come from the former? And if so what are the implications of this?

1.9 It is clear that marxist analysis is a very important part of WP thinking. Does this mean that we are a marxist party and if so do we say so publicly? How do we get over the fact that public perceptions of words like 'marxism' are negative in the extreme and thus a barrier to communicating what we are actually about?

1.10 How do we define the objective of the Workers Party? - It is easy to say that our objective is socialism, but what do we actually mean by that?

1.11 We are probably agreed on what constitute the core values of socialism: the placing of the human being at the centre of society, our collective responsibility for individual well-being, the belief that what human beings have in common is more important than the differences between them.

1.12 We are probably also agreed that the economic logic of capitalism cannot produce a society where those values can flourish. But could a more controlled capitalism do so i.e. what has become known as the social democratic model, which accepts the capitalist mode of production but seeks to make it more socially responsible by varying degrees of social control? (The experience of traditional social democracy is not encouraging in this regard. But is there now an opportunity for socialists and social democrats to both look for new solutions? Or are social democrats just going to throw in their lot with capital completely?)

1.13 Many of us would have said that the public ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange was a defining characteristic of socialism. Can we still say this in view of recent enormous upheavals in the countries of Eastern Europe? Their mode of production did not in itself lead to a society people wished to defend. And yet if we do not have such public ownership how do we
place the human being rather than capital at the centre of society? Can we separate the values we wish to see dominant in society from an economic framework which respects those values?

1.14 Defining our objective is one thing. The Workers Party has also to set out how that objective is to be achieved. Political change requires political support. And the type of substantive change we seek will generate tremendous political opposition. To be able to deal with that, The Workers Party needs not just electoral support but the conscious and active political support of the vast majority of people for its objectives. It has to be an active, campaigning party, which combines parliamentary and extra-parliamentary forms of political struggle. It must work with people, rather than just for them, in pursuit of accepted objectives. In other words, it seeks to be a hegemonic force in society, capable of giving leadership right across civil society. And the central political concept around which that hegemony can be constructed is that of democracy.

1.15 The task of the Workers Party is to mobilise the ordinary women and men of this country for their own interests by challenging a system which puts the interests of capital at its centre and constructing in its stead one which places human beings there. Do we do that only through our own Party? Or by the construction of alliances (as in Rainbow Coalition and Left Co-operation strategies)? Is it possible to be a mass Party and at the same time a vanguard Party?

1.16 Our primary task may be to mobilise people politically in Ireland, but it is increasingly clear that the concept of socialism in one country is a non-starter at this stage. For example, one of the key anti-democratic factors within capitalist economies is the existence of vast multinational corporations which exercise enormous influence with virtually no democratic accountability. These corporations operate on an international scale, though they affect the economies of nations and the lives of individuals. Exerting any form of control over them is an extremely difficult task and one that can only be tackled on an international scale.

1.17 The international dimension is also reinforced by developments in the European Community such as economic and monetary union and the prospect of political union at a later stage. Events in Eastern Europe have created difficulties for many socialists, but they have also opened up tremendous opportunities for changing the face
of European politics in a very dramatic way. Have we any ability to influence things at this level?

1.18 The Workers Party is democratic and socialist. Some people pose an opposition between the terms ‘democratic socialism’ and ‘revolutionary socialism’. Again this is primarily a problem of language. ‘Revolutionary’ is taken to refer to methods and is equated with ‘insurrectionary’. What is revolutionary about the WP is our objective of substantive change in the way society is organised.

1.19 Heresy: The WP exists as a party in its own right rather than as a ginger group within a larger party ……..why? Would we be more effective within say the Labour Party or even Fianna Fail? After all, our members in Britain tend to be in the Labour Party (a very broad church) rather than the CP (s).

2. DEMOCRACY, SOCIALISM, CAPITALISM

2.1 The Workers Party holds that socialism and democracy are inseparable. Democracy is about the majority exercising power over their own lives; socialism is about providing the framework in which that can be done, based on a collective responsibility for individual well-being.

2.2 Socialism aims to do more than provide people with the basics of living. It seeks also to allow people to develop their full potential as human beings.

2.3 The Workers Party is committed to democracy in its own organisation. It operates on the principle that decisions are made democratically and that there is collective responsibility for implementing those decisions. The leadership is democratically elected and accountable to the members.

2.4 The Workers Party stands also for a democratic and pluralist political system, where parties compete on an equal footing.

2.5 Free market capitalism is not compatible with democracy. Capitalism is primarily about the private accumulation of wealth through the mechanism of exploitation. It creates inequalities of power which distort the environment in which democracy operates. It creates poverty as well as wealth; it is dependent on the exploitation of huge portions of the globe
2.6 There is no evidence that capitalism is becoming any more humane or socially responsible. Both within countries and between countries the gap between rich and poor is widening. Millions of people continue to starve, not because of scarcity but because of a particular set of economic priorities imposed by the richer capitalist nations. Power is not becoming more dispersed but rather is being concentrated into fewer and fewer hands. The socialist critique of capitalism has lost none of its validity.

2.7 Conservatives assert that only a free market capitalism can guarantee democratic rights. But democratic rights have never been freely bestowed in capitalist societies. Capitalism wants rights for capitalists - the rights necessary to accumulate profit. Democratic rights for the majority - the right to vote, freedom of assembly etc - were won only by long struggles and against vicious opposition. Those rights are crucially important, but they are limited because of the limited sphere in which they are allowed to operate.

2.8 Democratic principles must be extended throughout all spheres of society, economic and social as well as political. The concept of democracy itself must be strengthened, so that participative as well as representative forms of democratic activity are engaged in.

2.9 If democratic values are to triumph the capitalist mode of production must be transformed through a continual extension of democratic controls. There is a wide range of possible forms of social control of enterprises and no single one will be most appropriate in all cases. Social control must accommodate the interests of consumers and the wider society as well as those of the producers. (It may well be that different modes of production will continue to co-exist within a broadly socialist economy ?) What types of control are possible, in the short term and in the long term ? Do we distinguish between State control and public control ?

3. THE MARKET

3.1 In current debates 'the market' seems to be used interchangeably with 'free enterprise economy'. But the market is a mechanism and the role played by the market
depends on the mode of production with which it is associated. Markets have existed for thousands of years, so are not necessarily specifically a capitalist phenomenon. And interference with markets is not necessarily socialist. Even under capitalism there are huge sectors of the economy where the market is not allowed to operate. In some cases this is due to pressure from the owners/producers (as e.g. in the Common Agricultural Policy) and is certainly not in the interests of consumers. In other cases it is due to political consensus (e.g. education and health services) and is very much a progressive development. Capitalism would like a free market in labour, but hundreds of years of trade union and working class struggle have gone into preventing that from happening. On the other hand many of the most elitist professions operate a virtual closed shop and a healthy exposure to the market would do them the world of good.

3.2 For the foreseeable future there will be a role for a market mechanism even within a predominantly socialised economy. But there will be huge political differences as to the appropriate sectors in which the market should apply and the nature of the controls that should be enforced. It seems axiomatic for instance that if a government wishes to influence economic policy in any considerable way that it must have some form of control of financial institutions. Markets may be useful in matching supply and demand (but in orthodox economics demand means not just needs and/or wants but ability to pay).

3.3 There also seems to be a tendency to equate 'command economy' with 'planned economy'. It seems to me (a non-economist) that you can have a planned economy which is not a command economy and that capitalist countries have used planned economies when it suited them (e.g. Japan). Between the State and the consumer is there a role for 'civil society' in planning an economy?

4. CLASS

4.1 The late twentieth century has seen dramatic changes in the composition of the working class resulting in a high degree of fragmentation and segmentation. This poses serious questions for a party whose fundamental analysis is based on class and whose political strategy is based on the development of class consciousness.

4.2 But this is not an entirely new problem. There have
always been divergences and conflict of interest within the working class and it has always been a key task for the socialist movement to transcend those divisions.

4.3 Class remains fundamental to the way our society is constructed, but it may not always be experienced primarily in the workplace. It may be as consumers or as housewives or as peace campaigners or as environmentalists that we come into collision with capitalism and a party aiming to be hegemonic must be able to provide leadership to all these disparate groups.

4.4 The traditional view of the working class as the natural constituency for socialist politics was based in large measure on the notion that the working class had no stake in the existing system. Can this view be sustained? Capitalism has, after all, managed to deliver a good standard of living to large sections of the working class, though at a very high cost to other sections.

5. IDEOLOGICAL STRUGGLE

5.1 In the modern state, government is by consent rather than by coercion. And that consent is based on a view that the status quo (i.e. capitalism) is the natural order of things. In other words, consent is not so much a matter of choosing between alternatives as a failure to see that there are any alternatives.

5.2 This difficulty is compounded by recent developments in Eastern Europe. While we have a critique of capitalism that was never more relevant, we have difficulty conveying a vision of what a socialist society might look like, although we know the values that we wish to assert there. I think this, more than anything else, has taken the edge off our ideological struggle. Yet ideological struggle is absolutely critical in the generation of the kind of hegemony and consent we are seeking to build.

5.3 It is one thing to be against capitalism, and to generate a protest vote on that basis. We need also to build support for an alternative to capitalism which will not be dismissed as either utopian or as equal misery for all. We cannot construct that new vision in isolation from the people whose consent we are looking for. We must involve them in the task. The new society will not spring into being fully formed on the day of a WP parliamentary majority. It will be constructed bit by bit by progressive forces in this country, in alliance with a Party which knows where it is going. Power in the modern state is no longer concentrated in one site such as parliament, and capturing one site is not sufficient. Power resides in many locations, e.g. the state apparatus, (including the army and police), the organs of civil society, peoples organisations, trade unions, media etc. Our task lies in all these areas.