

1991

Party Programme : The Workers Party

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This party programme is being produced in the midst of massive political transformations in the world order brought about by the revolutionary effects of Gorbachev's reforms in the Soviet Union, the collapse of the socialist states of Eastern Europe and the end of the Cold War. The socialism born of the October Revolution is dead. From all sides we are told that not only has the communist project collapsed but that its demise implicates any political project which looks beyond the combination of representative democracy and the market economy. "Socialism" is now supposedly of interest only to sentimentalists, incorrigible idealists or historians.

We reject the implications of these facile proclamations of the "end of history". At the same time we do recognise that there is widespread disorientation on the left in Ireland and throughout the world. The collapse of "really existing socialism" has provoked an enormous intellectual, emotional and organisational crisis. Some of those who had been the most trenchant supporters of this type of socialism have abandoned everything, as if the sole raison d'etre of their socialism had been to protect the Soviet Union and not to transform the society in which they lived. At both a cultural and political level, militants weaned on democratic centralism have found it difficult to adapt to pluralist decision-making. Emotionally, the loss of a vision,

however faulty, has produced depression and much self-flagellation . This programme represents an attempt to chart a way through the shoals of neo-liberal triumphalism, socialist disorientation and, perhaps most dangerous of all the remaining reefs of the type of routinised thought which refuses to see the need for a fundamental rethinking of the socialist project itself.

In the difficult but necessary process of developing the policies that will give a reality to our democratic socialist values we will continue to have a firm basis in the continuing strength of socialist argument as a critique of capitalism. Whether argued in terms of morality, social and political equity or the inherent inequalities of a class society, the contradictions of capitalism, the glaring inequalities of wealth and power between classes, gender and countries threaten and alarm the world. The financial power of the transnational corporations dwarfs the GDP and political sovereignty of many states. The crippling debt problems of many Third World states, not to mention that of the USA, threatens the international banking system. The advances of industrialisation are mocked by famine and grave ecological dangers. It is hard to imagine that the international difficulties facing humankind can be solved and the world economy prosper, without some level of national and supra-national

planning or regulation. Insofar as this will involve the subordination of private interest and market forces to some broader conception of the public good or the needs of humankind, these policies will be effectively socialist.

In Ireland ,where for decades the two major parties have occupied a narrow and unimaginative ground of consensus on central areas of economic and social policy , we are now urged to pursue the "centre ground". Ireland has little need for one more party which accepts the conventional wisdom of the current forms of economic and social management. After decades in which the state has acted as the facilitator of private enterprise the economic and social results have been mediocre. Despite promises of general prosperity , the benefits of Irelands economic development since the 1950s have been very unevenly distributed and in fact state policies have helped to exacerbate inequality . Whether we examine the health service, education or taxation the story is the same, the dominant policies which have produced unacceptable levels of unemployment and emigration have also ensured that it is the middle class that has benefitted disproportionately from the development of a very partial welfare state.

It is to the paradox of the Irish state which absorbs vast resources and yet achieves so little that our home-grown Thatcherites have addressed themselves with some degree of

plausibility in the last ten years. But while we recognise the problem we reject the simplistic neo-liberal solution of deregulation, privatisation and reduction in public expenditure. We cannot accept that the state is the problem and the market is the solution. The market will act to reinforce existing strengths and weaknesses in any economy and in the case of a small, open and weak economy it will simply ensure a position low down the league table of economic success continues to be reproduced well into the next century. Just as Thatcherism in the UK did nothing to address the long-term problem of the uncompetitiveness of British manufacturing industry and merely hastened the process of decline and deindustrialisation, market forces have provided no solution to Ireland's undistinguished economic performance.

Such a solution will involve radical innovations in all spheres of Irish life but at their centre will be the development of a new relationship between a reformed Irish state and Irish society. We need a "developmental state" a state able to identify sectors capable of long term growth and with the power and resources able to sustain long term investment in those sectors. The "developmental state" need not be a larger body than the current state, in fact it might be smaller and less wasteful of resources but it would display a much greater capacity to

achieve its purposes than the existing state. For such a state to develop we need an intellectual and cultural revolution in Ireland. We need to move away from the political culture of nods and winks, "cute-hoorism" and accomodation to the limpet-like forces of conservatism, inefficiency and prostration before unaccountable power centres. The present Irish state is a creaking structure of disparate elements- democratic, elitist, clientilist and corporatist. It needs to develop a more coherent and democratic unity and this can only emerge together with a public philosophy which ground the purposes and policies of the state in the kind of conception of the public good which has been a consistent core value of the democratic socialist tradition. As the consensual glues of Catholicism and Nationalism lose their grip on an increasingly diverse and demanding society, the values and concerns of socialists have never been more relevant . But this is a relevance that we cannot merely proclaim we can only persuade our large potential audience if we combine values and critique with hard thinking about the tools and policies we would use to make these values a reality.