

COVID CRISIS IS A CAPITALIST CRISIS

- Governments put business interests ahead of public health
- Workers must not pay the price – socialist policies to protect lives & livelihoods

Covid-19 pandemic one year on...

By Roise McCann

Food banks

Reliance on food banks has become increasingly prevalent during the pandemic. Strikingly, some 82% of single parents in the UK said they couldn't afford food, heating and clothes for their kids, and nearly half reported taking on more debt during the Covid-19 crisis. However, many feel there is a stigma around using food banks.

Class inequality

This crisis has fallen most sharply on low income working-class communities. In the south, the CSO (Central Statistics Office) statistics show that those whose gross

household income is less than €60,000 – 62.6% of all households – constitute 81% of all Covid cases, while the 22.6% of households with a gross income of €80,000 or more constitute only 2% of cases!

Women bear brunt

Economic inequalities affecting women have been brought to the fore during Covid-19. Women are disproportionately likely to work in sectors shut down during the pandemic, such as retail, and have less secure work arrangements, like zero-hour contracts. Women are not only faced with job precarity during the pandemic, but evidence has shown women have borne the

brunt of childcare responsibilities. These conditions present an impossible task for women, working in precarious employment and having to look after children at the same time. It highlights the need for secure jobs and a strong welfare system to adequately fund and provide free childcare facilities, which at the moment are an expensive and inaccessible service.

Big pharma rip-off

Pharmaceutical companies are charging developing countries more for vaccines than richer countries. EU countries will pay €2.5 per dose to AstraZeneca, while countries such as Uganda are forced to pay €5.80 per dose for the same vaccine.

Racial disparities

Structural racism has been cited as partly to blame for disproportionate Covid-19 deaths in Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities. It has been reported that BAME individuals had between 10 and 50 per cent higher risk of death due to Covid-19 than white British people. Professor Kevin Fenton stated that the pandemic "shone a light on health disparities", stressing that poor housing, overcrowding and occupational exposure leaves ethnic minority groups vulnerable to the virus.



Ryanair CEO O'Leary wants people to fly again regardless of safety

Bailouts fund fossil fuels

53% of the Covid-19 recovery funding allocated to energy companies by G20 governments has been handed to fossil fuel projects, equivalent to around \$151 billion.

Billionaire bonanza

Ten of the richest people in the world, including Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk, have boosted their wealth by more than \$400 billion since the

pandemic began. At the same times, hundreds of millions of people have been driven into absolute poverty.

O'Leary: at it again...

Millionaire Ryanair boss Michael O'Leary has urged the public to book their summer holidays abroad, against the advice of UK Transport Secretary Grant Shapp. O'Leary is not only responsible for Ryanair being "one of Europe's top polluters", but a key example of profiteering during a global health crisis.



82% of single parents in the UK said they couldn't afford food for their kids

The pandemic & the deepening mental health crisis

By Adam Dudley

BEFORE ANY of us had heard of Covid-19, one in 10 people globally lived with a mental health disorder. Ireland, North and South, has consistently registered levels higher than the average (around 15%) and some of the highest prevalence in the world for anxiety disorders and psychiatric disorders like Schizophrenia. Since Covid struck, studies paint a picture of mental health issues spreading through communities much like the virus itself. Unlike the virus, however, it is not social contact which allows it to move through the population, but social isolation.

Increasing loneliness and despair

The Psychological Society of Ireland concludes that increases in loneliness, nervousness and reduction in life satisfaction for the general population mirror increases in depression, anxiety and PTSD symptoms for those most affected. Health workers, in particular, are experiencing PTSD symptoms, while teenagers are struggling most with depression and anxiety. More than

half of adult mental health sufferers first report with symptoms as teenagers.

Feelings of loneliness and anxiety have doubled over the last two years for those aged 18-34. One study of final year students in Kerry found that 86% felt Covid had worsened their mental health – 37% significantly so. Ninety percent reported extreme worry regarding the uncertainty around the Leaving Cert. That particular saga, leaving around 60,000 students in limbo for months, exposes the reality that governments are gambling with our lives and are willing to jeopardize our mental health to return to 'business as usual'.

Economic catastrophe

Job losses or reduced working hours due to Covid amounted to the equivalent of 225 million jobs lost globally in 2020. 8.7% of young workers (15-24) lost their jobs – as retail, tourism and food production industries collapsed. One study from the US showed that more than half of low-paid workers have struggled to pay bills, with 32% having problems paying their mortgage or rent, and almost 20% have been unable to find the money for necessary medical care.

More than a third reported borrowing money from friends and family and using food banks. The accumulated effects of this economic crisis are not difficult to predict – social isolation, disruption in work and education, loss of income, the burden of debt and housing uncertainty. We are at the foothills of a generalized mental health pandemic.

Wealth inequality – unprecedented

As Nero played his fiddle while Rome burned – so the rich and powerful have been able to revel in bumper profits as the crisis has ravaged working-class communities. A recent OXFAM report into income inequality in the context of Covid found that nine Irish billionaires have increased their wealth by €3.28 billion since the start of the pandemic. That's more than three times the annual budget for mental health services in Ireland. Globally, as \$3.7 trillion has been lost by workers – a remarkably similar amount has been gained by the world's billionaires (\$3.9 trillion).

All that wealth, idle in the bank accounts of the super-rich, could be used to protect and create jobs, invest in crippled health services and transform the lives of the majority of the world's population struggling to



The pandemic crisis will have lasting effects on people's mental health

cope with a system incapable of providing a future free from poverty, disease and climate change.

The capitalist system puts the rights of the rich to become richer above the rights of the majority to a better future. In place of isolation, workers, young people and the oppressed need to come together to

fight for a world where its wealth is publicly owned, democratically controlled and planned to meet the needs of all. This can lay the foundation for a society based on human solidarity that seeks to tackle the urgent problems of the mental health crisis, poverty and the destruction of our ecosystem.

Tory subservience to profit leaves over 120,000 dead



Health Minister Matt Hancock breached rules over the awarding of government contracts
By Cerys Falvey

AT THE time of writing, the UK's Covid death toll stands at over 121,000. When it passed the 100,000 mark, Boris Johnson said his government had done everything it could - how untrue this was! We all remember the PPE crisis at the beginning of the pandemic, where health staff were being sent into Covid-infected areas wearing out of date masks and gowns. The government was made well aware that their PPE stocks weren't sufficient for a pandemic and yet chose not to make the necessary preparations.

Furthermore, scientists have cited the government's inability to create a proper track-and-trace system and

unwillingness to address international travel as leading to the winter surge. However, if we go back to before the pandemic, the NHS was already not fit for purpose, thanks to a decade of austerity, outsourcing and privatisation. The pandemic has only sharpened already existing health inequalities, with working-class and BAME people being more likely to die from Covid due to their overrepresentation in overcrowded housing and essential jobs. Meanwhile, social care has been cut to the bone.

At every turn, the Tory government has ignored scientific advice, refusing to impose lockdowns until infection rates were already soaring. They have prioritised profits over people's lives. Had lockdowns been called earlier, thousands of deaths could have been avoided. Had the government put in place and en-

forced protections for workers - such as guaranteed right to work from home, a moratorium on redundancies, full income protection, and so on - people would not be forced to choose between providing for themselves and their families, and risking contracting or spreading the virus.

Tory donors get to profit from pandemic

A recent court ruling found that Health Minister Matt Hancock had breached transparency rules around the awarding of government contracts, and also breached the ministerial code. Those with connections to the Tories have been first in line to profit from the pandemic, even if they have no expertise to offer. You would think the Labour Party would go on the offensive on this issue - but Keir Starmer has refused to even call for Hancock's resignation!

It's up to workers and young people to get organised and resist this rotten government and its continued bungling of the Covid crisis. An example of how this can be achieved was seen in January, when teachers in the National Education Union threatened to refuse to return to work and forced the government to keep schools closed. With the new 'roadmap' to end lockdown, including plans to fully reopen schools on 8th March, it's urgent that workers get organised to ensure that this government is not again allowed to play games with public health in the interests of profit.

Suppress the virus: Health before profit

By Finghín Kelly

WHILE BEING interviewed about Ryanair's near €1billion loss, CEO Michael O'Leary arrogantly attacked the Covid-19 measures, calling for a complete re-opening of society (and crucially for him the airlines!) once over 50s have been vaccinated.

Should his demands be satisfied it would guarantee a new wave of infections, thousands more deaths and potentially a major impetus for the development of more harmful strains of Covid-19.

O'Leary has always been one of the most arrogant and ignorant representatives of big business. It is no surprise that he cares little for the wellbeing of his workers, customers, or wider public. For him his profits and the future of his company come first, regardless of the wider cost.

However, O'Leary is not an aberration. He might be an outlier in terms of crudity and vulgarity, but the logic of weighing up the interests of business and their profits with public health is the approach of capitalism. Such an approach goes to the

heart of the government's, 'Living With Covid' plan; a plan whose logic is that there is an acceptable level of infections and death.

Government prioritises business interests

The Socialist Party rejects that logic and demands an approach that is aimed at dramatically repressing the virus. Public health and wellbeing must come before the interests of businesses.

We support the approach of suppressing the virus until there are very low, single digit cases per day, and putting all the resources needed for thorough tracing of detected cases. Mandatory 14-day quarantine for international travel and mass testing to identify as many asymptomatic and undetected cases as possible is also essential.

Such an approach would end the yo-yo lockdowns and the massive disruption of people's lives. It would also dramatically eliminate the scope for more mutations of the virus to emerge.



Ryan Air boss, Michael O'Leary blamed the Covid-19 measures and called for a complete re-opening of society, irregardless of public health

A necessity not a commodity – mass produce generic vaccines



Patents for life saving vaccines and drugs should be abolished and the expertise of the workforce of the healthcare sector should be pooled globally

By Peter McGregor

ALMOST A year since we first locked down in Ireland, vaccine roll out has begun and talk of when lockdown can be ended in a more concrete way is starting. The question still begs, however, could we have been at this point earlier if the system were set up in a fundamentally different way?

The record time in which the various vaccines were produced is a true testament to the potential of human ingenuity. In the UK there are at least seven different vaccines either being rolled out or developed. That is seven different companies working independently of each other. If these resources were pulled together from the start there is a possibility that a vaccine or vaccines could have been developed faster, and possibly be more effective.

The vaccine league table

Oxford University initially stated that it would give the rights to their vaccine to any drug making company, but just weeks later, after being urged by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, they signed a contract with AstraZeneca, which gave that company exclusive rights. This is an example of private profiteering getting in the way of vaccine development, and is now standing in the way of the rollout. Vaccine roll-

out should not be a business opportunity or commodity, instead it should be an urgent necessity for public health.

The rollout of the vaccine internationally has been viewed by politicians as a sort of league table. This dangerous vaccine nationalism is another barrier to the roll out. The danger of hoarding vaccines in one country is that it allows the virus to run rampant in countries that don't have as much access (usually coun-

tries in the global south), which runs the risk of new strains developing, which may be less receptive to the vaccine.

Contempt for the poor

Countries in Africa have only received enough doses to vaccinate approximately 10% of their respective populations. Undoubtedly, a factor behind this is racism – the pandemic can continue in countries where the lives of poor people of colour are valued less. Such is the mindset of our capitalist rulers.

What we need to bring this pandemic to an end is the private ownership of pharmaceutical companies and healthcare industry: they should be nationalised under democratic workers' control. Patents for life saving vaccines and drugs should be abolished and the expertise of the workforce of the healthcare sector should be pooled globally.

Working-class people know how to run society in our own best interests. A socialist society run by and for working-class people would ensure an international, public health-first, non-racist rollout of the vaccine.

International travel & mandatory quarantine - what we say:

Extract from speech by Mick Barry TD:

“THE GOVERNMENT relented to the retail and hospitality lobby and opened up in the run-up to Christmas. This created a perfect storm for the virus with deadly consequences. We need a radically different approach to that of bending to the will of business interests... We need to go after this virus and repress it to single digit cases, speed up the vaccine programme, roll out mass testing and repress it further, thereby avoiding the need for yo-yo lockdowns and saving lives.

The failure of governments to repress the virus has led to the development of new strains. This danger will continue due to vaccine hoarding by richer states and profiteering by the pharmaceutical industry, which is putting the vaccines out of the reach of the majority of the world's population for the foreseeable future.

Mandatory quarantine

The emergence of new strains, combined with the need to repress the virus, points to the necessity for a very serious approach to international travel. We agree on the need for all people entering the State to undergo a quarantine of 14 days. There are legitimate fears about quarantines not been properly respected... There needs to be a significant boost to the resources given to assisting and checking people who are quarantining...

Despite coming forward with the Bill, the Government has still not

banned non-essential international travel. It is still possible to board a flight to or from here without having to show the trip is essential... For those who must travel, if travel is essential, there should be an obligation to have a negative test before travel and for quarantine to be respected and checked by public health officials...

People in this situation must be given information, advice and support to quarantine effectively, including income support to remove an economic push for people to break quarantine. Hotel facilities should be provided free of charge for people to quarantine safely where they feel they cannot otherwise do so such as, for example, people in crowded housing situations.

Civil liberties

There is clearly a strong case for extreme caution with regard to people travelling from areas with high levels of infection, or where new more virulent or dangerous strains of Covid are circulating. However, we in Solidarity have serious concerns about the legislation. The plan put forward in the Bill represents a very serious restriction on civil liberties. Of course, we all have had impacts on our civil liberties due to public health measures, but this is a form of detention without trial, with people being kept in solitary confinement for a period of two weeks. We must be extremely cautious in giving the State these powers.

We note and agree with the concerns raised by the Irish Council of Civil Liberties and Nasc about the Bill. The



ICCL points to the need for any measure that is a severe restriction on civil liberties to be proportionate to the public health risks and for the right of detainees to access medical and legal services, to have a system of inspections and for facilities to be staffed with fully trained individuals who understand their duty of care to detainees. Nasc.. has pointed out how the Bill will disproportionately impact a small but highly vulnerable number of refugees and family members.

Of particular concern is the manner in which these facilities will be outsourced to the private sector. Giving

private, profit-maximising companies the right to preside over the detention of people with next to or no real oversight is very problematic.

The profit motive will mean an incentive for skimping on facilities for detainees, on staffing levels and on infection control. Many of the people entering these facilities will be in vulnerable situations, for example, people returning from family crises, elderly people, people who do not speak English and people with physical and mental health difficulties, but no real protections or provisions for their needs are outlined in the Bill...

Dangerous powers

There is a danger that this quarantine policy could, therefore, develop into a more long-term attack on the rights of migrants, with people from poorer parts of the world particularly affected as the wealthy nations hoard the vaccines and leave them to suffer the virus for longer.

We need to suppress the virus. As part of this, we need to take serious steps on international travel but it would be foolish to allow the State and private companies this level of power, which can lead to a myriad of abuses."

Students ensure no forced Leaving Cert, but predictive grades not a solution

By Michael O'Brien

BLINDSIDED BY the third wave the government maintained a fiction into January that a 'traditional' Leaving Cert could take place this summer. Such was Minister Foley's pig-headedness that it took a revolt spearheaded by ASTI members, coupled with a fresh upsurge of online campaigning by students, to force a retreat on what would have been a disastrously premature return to schools.

However, the Government and Department of Education aided by a sustained campaign of media vilification of teachers has brought us to a point where there is a fresh schedule for a gradual return to schools in the month of March. This is combined with a hybrid Leaving Cert based on the students having the option for a traditional exam and/or predicted grade.

Self-organisation forces U-turn

The outcome chimes with the dominant demand that emerged from Leaving Cert students from the many organic social media-based cam-



Students organised a vibrant campaign on social media which forced the government back

paigns that sprung up, which in many cases were initiated by Socialist Party members, including Mick Barry TD. The self-organisation of secondary students is a very welcome development. It is understandable that a fallback option of a predicted grade from the perspective of many individual students suffer-

ing from stress will be greeted with a measure of relief. Between missing three months of schooling last year and two months so far this year, alongside witnessing the crumbling of the mental health of their peers because of the uncertainty, the overriding immediate concern was that there be no forced Leaving Cert.

The problem with predictive grades

However, the opposition among teachers to predicted grades and to a return to school in March, well in advance of serious headway with the vaccine is also entirely legitimate. The opposition to predicted grades among teachers is well founded and based upon not just the dearth of

course work from this year to base it upon, but also ties in with the resistance they have had to put up over the last decade to classroom-based assessment with the additional workloads implied for students and teachers. Furthermore, because of the resources more affluent students can access at home to assist with assignments the inequality of outcomes will likely be even greater than with the traditional leaving cert in the long term.

Open up universities!

The Socialist Party through our public reps, school student members and teacher union activists has argued consistently that the best way to reconcile the safeguarding of student mental health and the opposition to predicted grading among teachers is to massively expand third level places. We have argued that the Leaving Cert itself can be abolished in favour of open access to third level for students.

A long campaign needs to be waged to win the unions officially to a position to open access to universities. The loss of class time for current 5th year students means that this battle will arise again in 2022.

Irish Sea border threatens political instability

By Daniel Waldron

AS PART of the Brexit process, the Northern Ireland Protocol - which came into force on 1st January - has put a regulatory border down the Irish Sea, as the North remains aligned to the EU single market for goods. The level of disruption to supply chains has been more dramatic than most predicted. This may partially be down to 'teething problems'. However, regulatory checks are due to become more stringent from 1st April, when the so-called 'grace period' ends, including for meat products and other food-stuffs.

The political impact of the Protocol has been even more dramatic than its economic effects, however, provoking a sharp reaction from Unionism. At root, this reflects the widespread perception within the Protestant community that they are being forced into a de facto 'economic united Ireland'. Alongside the mounting calls from nationalists for a border poll and the rise in support for Scottish independence, this adds to the growing sense of insecurity and isolation of many Protestants, who feel that the Union is unravelling and they are threatened with becoming a minority in an all-Ireland state against their will.

DUP undermined

The DUP and Arlene Foster have taken much of the blame for this out-



Graffiti expressing opposition to the NI protocol has been painted across Belfast

come. They propped up the Tory government which then betrayed them by negotiating this deal, and are seen as having failed to lead any meaningful resistance to the prospect of an east-west border. One poll suggested DUP support had slumped by 9%, leaving it in second position behind Sinn Féin, with much of this support going to boost the hardline Traditional Unionist Voice. The DUP are frantically trying to win back this ground, belatedly campaigning at Westminster and in the courts for the Protocol to be scrapped, while also stepping up their reactionary sabre-rattling on issues like abortion.

Tensions around this issue have already resulted in threats against port staff in Larne, who were temporarily withdrawn by the local council. Posters opposing the east-

west border have appeared in towns across Northern Ireland, with some making comparisons to the resistance against Home Rule over a century ago. A spokesman for the Loyalist Communities Council - representing the UDA, UVF and Red Hand Commando - said that they may deem it necessary to "fight physically to maintain our freedoms within the UK."

Workers' movement must counter sectarian tensions

This is a warning to the workers' movement of the dangers that lie ahead if it fails to put its stamp on events. The British government and the EU - representing different capitalist elites - have cynically used the interests of ordinary people in Northern Ireland as a political football, threatening to destabilise the

situation here by hardening borders, either east-west or north-south. The sectarian forces in both communities will seek to capitalise upon the increased tensions arising from this deal, which can have disastrous consequences.

Representing over 200,000 workers from all backgrounds, the trade union movement has huge potential power. An emergency conference of union activists should be called to discuss how to defend jobs and livelihoods, but also how to challenge paramilitary threats against workers and resist any slide towards conflict. Ultimately, this will require the building of an anti-sectarian political voice for the working class, which unites workers and young people around socialist policies, in opposition to the pro-capitalist politicians of all hues.

Sean Graham police outrage adds insult to injury



Mark Sykes was arrested at a vigil commemorating the massacre

On 5th February, PSNI officers harassed those taking part in a small commemoration on the Ormeau Road in Belfast. The event marked the anniversary of a sectarian atrocity in 1992, when the UDA opened fire on customers in the Sean Graham bookies, killing five civilians and wounding another nine.

Mark Sykes - a survivor of the attack - was arrested for commemorating those killed, on the same spot where he was shot seven times 29 years previously. As he pointed out, he is "the only person that the PSNI has ever arrested in relation to the Sean Graham bookmakers." The families of the victims organised the event in a safe manner, including encouraging people to watch online rather than physically attend. Everyone has the right to remember their loved ones and seek justice and truth.

These events echoed the PSNI's heavy-handed intervention into last year's Black Lives Matter protests, where young people were harassed and fined for taking part in socially distanced events. The police had the powers to do this based on emergency Covid legislation rushed through by all the main parties at Stormont. At the same time, there have been many events - including some involving high-profile politicians - which have flagrantly violated Covid regulations but where the police have not intervened in the same manner.

Such was the public outcry that PSNI Chief Constable Simon Byrne was forced to issue an apology to the victims' families, and one officer was suspended pending a review. However, there needs to be a full and independent inquiry into how the PSNI is applying the Covid regulations. The Socialist Party also supports the families' call for the Police Ombudsman to immediately publish its report into the 1992 atrocity, in which many believe there was state collusion with the UDA.

1990s: How workers resisted sectarian bloodshed



Ballymena Young Socialists organised protests and demonstrations against sectarian attacks

By Chris Stewart

THE 1992 attack on the Sean Graham bookmakers on the Ormeau Road was part of a wider series of "tit-for-tat" killings carried out by loyalist and republican paramilitaries in this period. In response to these killings, time and again, workers came together through their trade unions to oppose sectarian violence and intimidation.

In the 1980s, out of the sectarian

tensions that were stirred by the Anglo-Irish Agreement, loyalist paramilitaries tried to step up their attacks on Catholics. In 1986, the IRA announced that any and all civilian workers who in any way helped state forces were considered "legitimate targets".

By this time, working-class communities were more segregated than ever. But in the workplaces, where Catholic and Protestant workers came together, the basis of a powerful workers' unity was built. In the late 1980s, workers staged walkouts

across the North in protest against sectarian attacks and intimidation, firmly re-establishing the idea of trade union-organised, area-wide protests and strikes. This set the stage for the 1990s, when workers repeatedly took united action against sectarian atrocities.

In January 1992, an IRA bomb killed 8 Protestant workers at Teebane in Mid-Ulster. The Socialist Party (then Militant) organised a local general strike through the Mid-Ulster Trades Council in response. Thousands of Catholic and Protes-

tant workers joined mass rallies. This gave a powerful example, and put pressure on the union leaders to take a similar approach.

Just weeks later, the Sean Graham shootings took place. The response was a 20,000-strong rally at Belfast City Hall in protest, organised by the trade unions. This was followed in 1993 by the 80,000-strong mass protest across the North following the loyalists' horrific Greysteel massacre. These are just a few examples. These protests played an important role in giving workers confidence to speak out against the ongoing bloodshed, and helped push the paramilitaries towards the 1994 ceasefires.

The fact that workers organised these historic protests through their trade unions highlights the inherent link between sectarianism and the social and economic problems facing working-class people, and gives a glimpse into the potential power of a united working-class party in the North, standing for the interests of workers. Today, workers overwhelmingly oppose any slide back into the violence of the past. Faced with a rise in sectarian tensions, the trade union movement must be prepared to take these kinds of coordinated, area-wide actions in response to any sectarian threats of attacks on workers.

Covid & the system attack gains made by women over decades

THE COVID crisis is creating unprecedented hardship for working class people all over the world – economically, socially, in terms of physical and mental health and in a multitude of other ways, writes Katia Hancke. But working class women are at risk of losing the most of all – decades of hard won gains in the fight against women's oppression are at risk of being wiped out by this crisis.

The impact of Covid-19

Women workers have born the brunt of job losses as it is the sectors with predominantly female workers that have been hardest hit – retail and hospitality to name just two. Globally, research shows that women's jobs are 1.8 times more at risk than men. The figures of women, especially young women, living in poverty are shooting up.

Women are also disproportionately asked to risk their health as frontline workers – care giving sectors such as nursing, childcare, teaching etc are overwhelmingly female. The Government sent nurses into the fray with PPE gear that was standard designed for a male physique – a small example of how deeply engrained sexism is in capitalist society, that it even is found in mundane details of everyday working life.

With the increase in working from home, the repeat closure of schools and childcare, the hours of unpaid labour in the home have shot up. Research in the UK shows that home



schooling alone added an average 5 hours of work per day for women, compared to 2 hours per day for men. For single parents (again, overwhelmingly women) the situation is even worse. Anyone who has ever been on a zoom call with a mother of (pre) school aged children will relate to what those figures mean in real life – people (women) desperately trying to juggle two, three or even four tasks at the same time. No wonder then that stress and mental health are reaching crisis point.

Women workers

Debenhams workers first highlighted how companies are let off the hook in mistreating their employees when they close up shop. Arcadia workers (again, overwhelmingly a female workforce) are now joining that fight for a just settlement. Frontline work-

ers found out that the best they can expect from this government is a round of applause – when it comes to actual appreciation for the huge sacrifices health workers and other essential workers have made over the last year, this government has been in hiding.

No solutions for childcare, no measures to ease the burden on the health service through investment, recruitment and better pay and conditions. Bosses are happy enough to have workers work from home but offer no supports to facilitate that transition – more profit for them, more stress for their employees.

Gender violence: a shadow pandemic

The most extreme crisis facing women is the shadow pandemic of gender violence spiralling out of control. On 22 February Safe Ireland published a re-

port that the situation had deteriorated significantly in the last few months of 2020 compared to the first lockdown. Between September and December 2020 800 women (and their children) were turned away from shelters with nowhere to go. Nearly 70 women per day now reach out to services for help. Bear in mind, those figures precede the current (and longest) lockdown.

All anecdotal evidence points to things getting even worse – in February the media covered 24 stories of extreme examples of gender violence every week. While there is no shortage of coverage of horrific violence committed against women, what is increasingly absent is a highlighting of the fact that this is a crisis. What is needed is coordinated response that highlights the issue, provides funding or services, increased capacity in shelters and crucially affordable housing as well as long term supports for survivors. While gender violence affects all women, the pressing need in even the most basic supports (such as shelter when someone flees a violent situation!) means that this government is most of all letting down working class women, who need those services most.

Build a socialist feminist movement

International Women's Day 2021 takes place after one year of this pandemic. Covid has graphically illustrated the systemic injustices and oppression women face under capitalism. In the coming year we must resolve to build a multi-gendered, multi-racial working class, socialist feminist movement that will end the rule of this system.



When enough is enough: The case for socialist feminism

By Katia Hancke

THE LAST few years we have seen the growing radicalisation and mobilisation of a new generation of women right across the world. International Women's Day protests on all continents became just one expression of a global movement mobilising hundreds of thousands of working-class women against gender violence, for bodily autonomy and challenging oppression in all its forms. This is not just another "single issue" movement, it is a movement that increasingly puts the whole capitalist system in the dock as oppressive and backward.

Oppression and exploitation

No wonder that there is a direct connection between the development of this worldwide movement and the movements against oppressive regimes and exploitation that are developing in many countries. From Belarus to Thailand, in struggles right across Latin America, young women have been once again to the forefront.

The terrible consequences of the pandemic are affecting working class women in a multitude of ways. But events over the last year show that women have not forgotten an important lesson- if we organise, we can win. A new generation of women were no longer prepared to accept the status



Mass protests have been a feature of the new global women's movement

quo, leave alone they are now prepared to settle for further setbacks! In the harsh conditions of the first year of the pandemic, we have still seen that mood reflected in a new wave of #MeToo struggles from China to the Balkans to France, in powerful mass struggles for bodily autonomy such as the victory for abortion rights in Argentina.

Growing radicalisation

This same radicalisation is evident in Ireland – a new generation of women

is standing up against all expressions of oppression. Just think of the outrage at the Image Based Sexual Violence scandal, the protests against the attempted cover up of the Mother and Baby Home records. Gender violence has been firmly placed on the agenda as a pandemic that needs to be taken seriously.

All forms of oppression are being exposed and fought against – just look at the huge participation of youth in the Black Lives Matter movement. In the

economic struggles all working class people will have to wage in the next period to defend tens of thousands of jobs, as well as pay and conditions. The way has been led by the courageous Debenhams workers who for more than 300 days now are staunchly demanding a just redundancy settlement. Working class women are leading the way in struggles on many fronts.

For socialist change

In that context, socialist feminist ideas

are more relevant than ever. As socialist feminists, we understand that all these different issues are intertwined in one especially important way – they are inevitable under the capitalist system. From economically exploiting workers to leaning on conservative institutions to impose the status quo to creating a culture that idealises and promotes violence, it is those at the very top of society (and their political lackeys) who benefit, even profit from keeping things as they are. For the rest of us, this system has outlived its usefulness – and gives us nothing but environmental catastrophe, health crises, economic hardship and a society that relies on oppression and exploitation.

We fight against all expressions of oppression and exploitation and aim to bring together working class people of all genders, colour and background to create a united movement that ends the rule of our common enemy—the system of capitalism. We have a common interest to fight for a democratic, socialist society based on the democratic, collective ownership and control over the planet's wealth resources. Such a society would utilise the enormous achievements in science and technology to end and eradicate poverty and deprivation. The rule of the working class would have human solidarity as its cornerstone and in turn do away with the plethora of oppressions and injustices that capitalism has harnessed and fostered.

International Women's Day 2021

SOCIALIST FEMINISM MORE THAN EVER



Rosa Luxemburg @ 150: an inspiring revolutionary

By Becci Heagney
Socialist Alternative (ISA in Britain)

IN JANUARY 1919, after a failed uprising led by the newly-formed German Communist Party, Rosa Luxemburg refused to leave Berlin despite the real threats against her; she didn't want to leave her fellow workers who were experiencing counter-revolutionary repression. The Freikorps (paramilitary units) were sent to remove the 'head of the beast' - the revolutionary masses - by executing their influential leaders, including Luxemburg.

Under the orders of the so-called Social Democratic Party (SPD) leader Friedrich Ebert, Luxemburg was beaten and shot, her body thrown into the canal with rocks attached. It serves as a tragic lesson for Marxists that different approaches can become a life and death question for the working class as a whole. What took place after 1918-19, followed by other mistakes, was the smashing of the working class by fascism and the horrors of the Nazi regime.

Struggle & theoretical contribution

At the age of just 17, Rosa Luxemburg was a founding member of the social democratic party in her native Poland. Alongside Lenin, she moved the amendment at the 1907 Stuttgart conference which underlined the need for Marxists to oppose war, fight against the capitalist class in all countries and lead the working class to power. In Germany, she taught Marxist economics and quickly became a leading theoretician in the SPD, while regularly being arrested and imprisoned for her political activity.

The years that Luxemburg lived through were some of the most important and tumultuous for revolutionaries in history. The Second International - made up of social democratic parties across the world - was built and then destroyed in her lifetime. The German SPD was the biggest and most influential, with over 1 million members. But on the eve of WWI, the various parties supported their 'own' national capitalist class in the war, going against the most basic ideas of workers' internationalism. This betrayal led to a worldwide split between reformists and revolutionaries.

Luxemburg founded the Spartacus League within the SPD in opposition to the war and eventually split in 1917, forming the Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD). Coming late to understanding the need to organise a revolutionary party similar to the Bolshevik party in Russia was one of the biggest mistakes Luxemburg made.

However, it's easy to have sympathy with the position that Luxemburg was in. She was worried that the revolutionaries would be cutting themselves off from the mass of the working class. Because of her experience of sharp debate within the SPD, against the revisionism of Eduard Bernstein and then against the reformism of Karl Kautsky, Luxemburg maybe had more illusions in the idea of having the ear of the working class within the SPD. Had Luxemburg organised a revolutionary tendency within the SPD earlier and on a clearer basis, this could have won the best and



most class conscious workers and, in turn, could have had a bigger impact on the events of 1918-1919.

Development of ideas

Luxemburg was constantly discussing and developing her ideas. She argued ferociously against a narrow electoralist approach, correctly pointing to the need for the mass and conscious involvement of the working class in the changing of society, through workers' councils and through 'political general strikes'. She also argued against the anarchistic ideas of separating the trade unions from the political parties of the working class.

However, Luxemburg put too much emphasis on the 'spontaneity' of the masses and the development of class consciousness. The working class can move into struggle because of the crisis of capitalism, which itself impacts consciousness and can lead workers to draw socialist conclusions. But, without a revolutionary party organising this and giving it political expression, this impetus for change can be lost, as it was in 1918. Luxemburg partly acknowledged this but wasn't able to draw the corresponding organisational conclusions in time. She said: "Without the conscious will and the conscious activity of the majority of the proletariat, there can be no socialism. A class organisation is needed to sharpen this consciousness, to organise this activity; the parliament of the proletarians of town and country."

In her most famous work, *Reform or Revolution?*, she argued for the necessity of Marxists to fight for both as the only way to build a party which was rooted in the working class, but that it would also be necessary to also fight against any illusions that capitalism would be able to provide lasting reforms.

The successful revolution in Russia in 1917 had a huge effect on Luxemburg and she put all of her energies into fighting for a similar overthrow of capitalism in Germany, committed to the idea of international socialism. Had she not been murdered in 1919, she would have continued to play an extremely valuable role in the revolutionary events to come. We stand on her shoulders today, learning from her life and ideas - including her mistakes - and taking inspiration from her devotion to the struggle for socialism.

DUP launch cynical attack on abortion rights

Statement by ROSA activists in Northern Ireland

THE DUP and anti-choice groups are once again attempting to roll back on the right to choose, now putting forward a bill in support of restricting abortion access in cases where fetal anomaly would likely lead to severe disability.

The anti-choice lobby wish to use this issue as the thin end of the wedge, in order to launch broader attacks on abortion rights. This would only force people already in an extremely difficult situation to again travel to Britain to access reproductive care. Rather than restricting the right to choose, we should focus on providing all support necessary for people with disabilities and their families.

Anti-choice hypocrisy

Anti-choice groups don't care about people with disabilities. For example, Paul Givan - the MLA sponsoring the bill - was the minister responsible for implementing welfare cuts which hit people with disabilities hard. The DUP and other main parties have routinely put profit ahead of public health during the Covid crisis, leading to needless deaths. Precious Life - the most prominent anti-choice group - has also been peddling baseless lies and distortions about the Covid-19 vaccines. As with their anti-choice propaganda, rather than help-



DUP's attacks on abortion rights will be resisted

ing to save lives, this puts people at risk.

No trust in the Stormont parties

We can't trust the main parties to defend the right to choose, even those who have been forced to alter their position on this issue in recent years because of the shift in public attitudes and pressure from below. Last year, when the DUP put forward a motion condemning the expansion of abortion rights as a whole, Sinn Féin

tabled an amendment that supported restricting abortion access in precisely the manner which Givan and the DUP are now proposing!

The recent gains on abortion rights were hard won through protest and civil disobedience, which gave voice to the demand for change from below. The same approach will be needed to defend these gains from the dinosaurs at Stormont, and to ensure that everyone who needs an abortion can access one on the NHS in Northern Ireland.

Russia - Workers, women and youth challenge Putin's grip

By Michael O'Brien

BY MID-FEBRUARY, some 10,000 overwhelmingly young people have been arrested across Russia for their participation in protests sparked off by the arrest of opposition figure Alexey Navalny on his return from Germany after his recovery from a near fatal poisoning.

In a regime where the right to protest is restricted, the turnouts of thousands is significant and has to be understood in the context of growing discontent in the face of economic hardship for the overwhelming majority. Meanwhile a clique around Putin and the oligarchs have grotesquely enriched themselves.

Deep support for Navalny?

Navalny, whose political record is chequered, has tapped into the mood through his YouTube exposés of Putin's obscene wealth. That, his survival of an assassination attempt, and his willingness to be jailed has enhanced his standing in the eyes of many, but it would be a mistake to identify the broader mobilisations as a total endorsement of Navalny.

Former Socialist Party member and MEP for Dublin Clare Daly has



1000's of young people turned out to protest the arrest of opposition leader Alexey Navalny and faced brutality from the police

effectively done this and largely given the Putin regime a free pass in a well covered speech in the European Parliament. Surveys of demonstration participants over the last two months have been conducted. They found that only 33% of those surveyed in Moscow and 22% in Petrograd say they fully trust Navalny.

Navalny began his political career in the liberal capitalist opposition party, Yabloko, before embarking on

a nationalist populist course, flirting with the far right for a period before. More recently he has focused on elite corruption and emphasising more economic demands that appeal to the poor and low paid.

His alternative these days is a model of 'normal' capitalism. He has made the call for the protests to wind up until the summer and for tactical voting for, in reality, tame pro-regime 'opposition' parties in the

Duma elections later this year.

The role of socialists

This call has been greeted with disappointment in the movement. The Socialist Party's sister organisation in Russia, Sotsialisticheskaya Alternativa, has actively participated in the protests across the country and one of our supporters, Dzhavid, was jailed for seven days in Kazan for "disobeying police orders".

Our banners which read, "Against the regime, oppression and poverty" and for a "New 1917", have brought us into contact with many seeking a real alternative and open to our anti-capitalist, socialist position. Given that 40% to 50% of those attending the protests have been women we have made the call for a two hour strike on International Women's Day, as the next step for the movement.

Catalonia: Left surges, but far-right makes breakthrough



The Catalan election results saw the collapse of the traditional right wing party, the PDeCAT

By Amy Ferguson

THE CATALANIAN elections held on 14th February were the third in just five years. They were convened after the Spanish state dismissed, once again, the president-elect of the Catalan government as part of its persecution of the independence movement. But there will be no rest for the establishment after these last elections. Far from vanishing, the national question will only be aggravated by working-class anger in Catalonia, spurred on by the mismanagement of the Covid-19 pandemic and the re-

alities of the sharp global economic crisis.

As a result of that anger, we can see two significant trends in the election results. First of all, the percentage of votes for what the mass media describe as 'the left' was almost 58%, the highest since the 1930s. Especially encouraging was the result of the CUP (the leftmost force of these), which increased its vote share by more than 50% since 2017. Secondly, these elections saw the collapse of the traditional right wing, with PDeCAT (the historic party of the Catalan bourgeois) not even making it to parliament. However, such a collapse is not all good news, as many of the right's

traditional voters have emigrated to the far-right Vox party, which has entered the Catalanian Parliament for the first time.

The Socialist Party's sister organisation, Socialismo Revolucionario, has warned against the left going into government with pro-capitalist parties. Rather than managing capitalism, they should provide real opposition, fighting for a decent wage, housing for all, well financed public services, etc. Such demands could only be won by building a united revolutionary force that brings together workers, youth, and the oppressed in a movement to break with capitalism and fight for a Catalan socialist republic.

Spirit of the Arab Spring erupts again, ten years on

By Lucy Marron

TEN YEARS after the Arab Spring, renewed upheavals are taking place across Egypt and Tunisia. The post-revolutionary governments did not break from the capitalist system, a system that is irreconcilable with equality. The millions who took to the streets to demand 'bread, freedom, and social justice' have yet to be answered.

Egyptian society is still wrought with economic degradation and repression. In 2019, protests re-emerged against the corruption of the el-Sisi regime. A year later, protests again swept the country against housing demolitions and rising unemployment, with a renewed call for el-Sisi to step down. The pandemic has accelerated unrest. While unemployment soared, the government gave 14 times more to prop up big business than was allocated for Covid relief. Hotels and tourist facilities have been exempted from property tax, gas and electricity prices have been reduced for large industrial enterprises: all the while, the cost of utilities for ordinary citizens has remained stagnant, despite the fact these people have been hit hardest by this crisis.

In Tunisia, over 6,000 protests took place throughout 2020, and they have again resurged this year. Thousands protested with the slogan, "The people

want to end this regime!" Ten years after the Tunisian revolution, the people have once again taken to the streets against poverty, injustice and marginalisation. The ruling-class has cracked down hard on activists, with hundreds arrested, in order to defend policies that mean impoverishment for the poor, and increasing wealth for the ruling elite.

It is clear the legacy of the Arab Spring is still alive in the minds of many who were involved, as well as a new generation who have been at the forefront of the recent protests in both Egypt and Tunisia. The strengthening of the trade unions is an important achievement of the 2011 revolution, but the left is still weak after a decade of persecution, but also because of a reformist approach rooted in Stalinist ideology. A strong revolutionary party with a programme that can unite the masses will be necessary to carry through a socialist transformation which can meet the needs of the masses.



South: Deliveroo workers getting organised

By Shane Finnan

THE WORKING conditions of Deliveroo riders in Dublin have deteriorated over the course of the pandemic, their health and safety has been put at greater peril, with often tragic and fatal consequences. Last September saw the horrific killing of Thiago Cortes in a hit and run attack.

Since the tragic death of Josh Dunne tensions have worsened. There's a general consensus amongst Deliveroo riders that they feel unsafe working in parts of the city. The pandemic has intensified anti-social behaviour with a layer of youth from the most hard-pressed areas. Deliveroo riders are targeted in racist attacks. An estimated 70-80% of Deliveroo riders are Brazilian, with the remainder predominantly Turks, Pakistanis, Indians, Spanish and some Irish. Many feel unsafe when in Deliveroo uniform and carrying the Deliveroo bags - as it makes them identifiable.

Essential workers with few rights

The series of level-five lockdowns has meant that Deliveroo riders are providing a frontline service. Fed-up with a spate of attacks and bike theft, Deliveroo riders have in recent weeks organised two unofficial strike actions that were partially observed. The actions have been widely supported online, however the organisation of Deliveroo riders is in its early



Deliveroo workers in Dublin pay tribute to Thiago Cortes who was killed while working in September 2020

stages and they are learning through experience what works and what needs to be developed further.

Subcontracting exploitation

In order to officially work for Deliveroo one obtains an 'account' from them. What has happened is that a section of better established Deliveroo workers have subcontracted their account to undocumented workers and take a cut from their earnings. The people here on a stu-

dent VISA are meant to only work 20 hours per week but in reality, they need to work 50 to 60 hours in order to get a living income to meet the rent and living expenses. There is a big informal economy aspect to this and when an undocumented worker comes to harm Deliveroo deny any responsibility or duty of care.

WE SAY:

- Eliminate bogus self-employment as normalised by Deliveroo.

- Regularise the status of the undocumented so that they can free themselves from subcontractors.

- Deliveroo must guarantee all riders a living wage.

- Deliveroo must supply tracking devices and should cover any bikes stolen from Deliveroo riders. Any Deliveroo rider harmed in the course of their work should be medically covered and protected by Deliveroo.

Debenhams struggle continues while Arcadia workers enter the fray

By Mick Barry TD

The Debenhams dispute reached the 300-day mark on 3rd February with workers continuing their campaign for a decent redundancy settlement right through the Level 5 lockdown.

Watches and in some cases pickets continue to be kept on the stores to prevent stock being moved.

Ex Debenhams shop stewards continue to demand of the Government that the €3m "offered" in December for an upskilling fund be converted into cash and put towards a decent redundancy offer. Meanwhile ex Arcadia workers in Cork braved stormy weather to place a picket on the Dorothy Perkins store.

The workers were protesting being cheated out of their "2+2" redundancy agreement and demanding the introduction of legislation to protect workers' rights in liquidation situations. They were joined by ex-Debenhams workers on the day.

The Programme for Government says that legislation to improve workers' rights in liquidation situations will be introduced in this Dáil but to date the Government has failed to show any urgency on the matter.

We will introduce legislation if the Government continue to drag their heels on this issue.

Leo bats for the bosses in Europe

By Robert Cosgrave

A NUMBER European ministers, from the most right wing governments, including Leo Varadkar, have challenged a recent European Commission directive, which would legally bind member-states to bring 70% of its workforce into collective bargaining coverage. They would prefer a non-binding "recommendation" with no practical or legal force.

While we have no illusions in the EU, this shows clearly the ideology at the heart of the government. While the EU average for coverage of workers under collective bargaining is 65%, in Ireland it's only about 40%!

All workers need collective bargaining rights, and while we support changes in legal framework that would aid workers organising, in and of themselves they are insufficient. For decades in Ireland, the workers' movement has lacked any meaningful industrial strategy, preferring to lobby for favourable legal changes in parliament - surrendering their greatest weapon: industrial action.

That very approach led us to the present situation. With or without this directive, workers need to organise themselves in preparation for the coming crisis. We need to prepare for employers' offensives and to defend existing conditions among organised workers, but also proactively fight to improve them.

North: End exploitation of nursing and medical students!

OUR HEALTH staff are working to breaking point in response to Covid-19. The pandemic has highlighted serious weaknesses in our health service, as a result of lack of decades of underfunding which have resulted in significant understaffing. Nursing and medical students have increasingly been used to plug the gap. Several online petitions demonstrate the reality of how these workers are being treated.

One petition sums up well how many student nurses feel: "Student nurses are burnt out and exhausted. We've had to pay out of our own pocket for accommodation to be able to work safely and give up part time work that would help us make ends meet. It's time to pay us properly."

It also points out that many students are working in Covid wards, at the same risk as their colleagues. Yet, while working 37.5hrs per week, they receive only a bursary of £430 per month - the equivalent of £2.86/hour. This does not meet basic costs of living. Correctly, the petition also states, "After ending payments for students working on COVID-19 wards, Health Minister Robin

Swann was pressured into offering a one-off "special recognition" bonus. We don't think that's good enough." The petition raises the need for a wage for student nurses

Another petition points out that - unlike in Britain - medical students in Northern Ireland get no funding for their final year of study, and so are expected to pay the fees themselves. Medical students who have a previous degree also receive no funding to cover the costs of their course. This is a huge burden, and places a medical degree out of the hands of many working-class students, who will not have the savings to cover such costs.

Both petitions highlight important issues that are linked - the lack of proper funding and financial support for students who are working in our health service. All students who have to work in the NHS as part of their course should be paid a living wage. To achieve this will require a combative campaign, including - when circumstances allow - industrial action, linked to broader demands for a real pay-rise for all staff, emergency investment to address understaffing and kicking private profiteers out of the NHS.



Campbell's comments reflect racism at heart of the system

By Eóin McCaul

DUP MP Gregory Campbell has refused to apologise for racist remarks that he made over a recent episode of Songs of Praise. The episode in question, the final of the competition for Gospel Singer of the Year, was performed and judged by an entirely black cast of musicians – fitting for a genre which originated in black churches in the US among the descendants of slaves. Campbell labelled this episode “the BBC at its BLM worst” and added, “...can you imagine an all white line-up with an all white jury and presented by a white person?”

This brings into question whether Campbell has actually watched television before this special. More realistically, such a scenario simply never bothered him enough to take to Facebook.

Bigotry and racist attacks linked

What makes Campbell's comments and his refusal to apologise particu-

larly disgusting, however, is that this came not even a month after the Belfast Multi-Cultural Association (BMCA) building was set on fire in a deliberate hate crime. The racism on display from Campbell and the vile attack on the BMCA are simply two different methods of achieving the same aim, which is to keep minority communities 'in their place' and living in fear. While the DUP politician - with his salary of £81,932, plus expenses - claims to be “completely working class”, his comments serve to divide and therefore weaken the actual working class by inflaming racial tensions which often materialise as physical harm to people in these communities.

Unite to tackle racism at its root

Unsurprisingly, Stormont has failed to develop any meaningful strategy to tackle racism here, which now accounts for more hate crimes than sectarianism. Without addressing the impoverishment of ethnic communities and the greater economic inequities in our society, however, the root cause of racism and other



Gregory Campbell faces backlash over disgusting racist comments

forms of bigotry – including the homophobia also promoted by Campbell and many in his party - will persist. We need to build a united struggle against racism and preju-

dice in all its forms, linked with a struggle for a better future for all, tackling the conditions of poverty, hopelessness and alienation in which hatred can breed.

CETA: Bosses' trade deal must be opposed

By Colm McCarthy

THE CETA trade deal needs to be met with strong opposition by working class people and the trade union movement. This is an investor rights treaty, allowing companies to sue states if their policies result in a reduction in their profits. As with other trade agreements, its purpose is to run over any obstacles to the companies making money,

Trade deals for big business

CETA was the first of a series of proposed trade deals passed at a European level and was followed by the Mercosur deal with a block of South American countries and the TTIP deal with the US that was put on ice during the Trump administration. Most of CETA has been in provisional operation for the last two years.

With or without TTIP, CETA will be used by US-based companies with Canadian subsidiaries to pursue such claims in Europe. Canada has previously had their manufacturing sector devastated by NAFTA. CETA will open the door to further attacks on workers' rights and conditions on both sides of the Atlantic.

It further copper-fastens the EU's policies of shutting off the potential to reverse privatisations. Among the companies that stand to benefit from the deal is the largest private landlord in Ireland, IRES a Canadian company. It does not take much to imagine such a company suing to reverse any policies aimed at reducing rents.



CETA is another neo-liberal trade deal that massively undermines workers' rights

CETA will be used as a further excuse for future governments to oppose any legislation that would contradict the wishes of corporations subject to the agreement.

The servile Green Party

While in opposition, the Green Party had opposed this deal, with Eamon Ryan hopping in front of whatever microphone would have him to state this. Once ensconced in government, its ministers have predictably changed their tune.

The opposition of environmentalists to the deal has good cause. The deal is an obstacle for legislation that would protect the environment if a corporation felt it contradicted its

rights. Ratification of the deal can also make it more difficult to stop the import fracked energy, which is responsible for one third of the world's methane emissions

Green Party representatives have pointed to their belief that the deal will pass with or without their support as a reason to support it in the latest representation of that organisation's pointlessness and failure to effect change, even within their own limited criteria.

After attempting a quick vote on the issue before Christmas, fears of losing a couple of Green TDs pressured the government to first postpone the vote and then send it to an Oireachtas joint committee for re-

view. The idea behind this is to allow the Greens enough space for most of their TDs vote it through and minimise any disruption to the coalition rather than any real investigation into the deal. The usual arguments about not wanting to hold up European treaties will come with an added “what with Brexit,” to any opposition to damaging policies emerging from the EU.

It will take organisation and pressure from below to defeat the CETA deal. This is a major challenge that the trade unions must step up to. We cannot tolerate a deal that gives big business a further license to profit at our expense of our living standards and that of the environment.

Justice for George Nkencho: Public inquiry needed!

By Myriam Poizat

ON 30 December 2020, George Nkencho, a 27 year old black man from Clonee was shot dead in front of his house by the Garda Armed Response Unit (ARU).

An unjustified response

The Gardaí had been called due to an altercation at Hartstown Eurospar, when George, in the midst of a serious mental health episode, injured one worker and made other workers and shoppers feel threatened.

While this was a serious incident, the response by the Gardaí in following George as he walked back to his house and then shooting him five times, including in the back while he was turned to face his front door, was totally disproportionate. George needed help and should be alive today.

'My brother needed help, not bullets' – Gloria Nkencho

From the early stage of the incident, far right elements have tried to justify the killing of George by spreading divisive and racist lies. However, as the truth about what happened has come to light, it has cut across those lies. In reality all working class communities should be extremely worried about the actions of the Gardaí and by right wing forces trying to normalise the killing of a young person. As Gloria, George's sister, recently stated:

“I just want to make it clear that this isn't a time for divide. I know there's a small percentage of society that's trying to turn this into a major race thing... We as a community, as a society, should focus on a life that's taken. We shouldn't let the small section of society that are trying to turn this into a big race thing, turn it into black against white. We're Irish. We're here. We're a community. My brother was taken, a person, a human life.”

A defective investigation

Yet, the independent GSOC investigation put in place by the Gardaí is extremely defective. Not only have key witnesses not been interviewed yet, but the Gardaí involved have not been suspended pending the investigation. GSOC is clearly not fit to carry out this investigation.

At a press conference organised on 11 February with the assistance of Socialist Party reps Ruth Copping and Mick Barry TD, the family called for an open, transparent and public investigation and for the Minister of Justice to act on it now.

Such a public inquiry should involve members of the family and community, and should look into potential biases of class and race the Gardaí might hold and the impact this has.

Review: Framing Britney Spears

directed by Samantha Stark

By Aislinn O'Keeffe

IN 1992, a ten-year-old Britney Spears performed a powerful version of The Judds 'Love Can Build a Bridge'. The host, Ed McMahon, interviewing her afterwards remarks on her 'pretty eyes' and asks her whether or not she has a boyfriend. A clearly uncomfortable Britney continues to smile and be polite, choosing her words carefully as she attempts to navigate a response in front of a large audience.

It is a situation that most women and girls will be familiar with – forced into the position of managing an adult man's emotions in the face of inappropriate comments - and an encounter that would come to characterise Spears' career. Incidentally, her 12-year-old male opponent, on the other hand, was asked what it was like to grow up on a farm.

The documentary 'Framing Britney Spears', aired recently in the UK and Ireland. It documents the #FreeBritney movement and tracks Spears' career, and the events that led up to the conservatorship that the 39-year-old performer and artist is currently subject to. It tracks the trajectory of the superstar, from down-to-earth, vivacious teenager to a young woman harassed and hounded by the capitalist media and pushed to the point of a mental breakdown.

Corporate sexism

One of the glaring features of the footage documenting Spears' rise to fame is the blatant sexualisation and objectification of the young star from the age of just 16 years old. From the sexualised school girl outfit of 'Hit Me Baby One More Time' to interviews and press conferences where presenters, often men more than twice her age, question the teenager about her breasts, kissing boys, her outfits and her virginity. Britney is hyper-sexualised by her record company and the capitalist media, which is contradicted by a media obsession with her virginity. This illustrates the trap that all women and girls are forced into – be sexy but not sexual – representing an impossibly precarious tightrope that women must walk where the acceptable balance is perpetually out of reach.

The sexualisation and objectification of Britney Spears however is not an anomaly or a once-off occurrence experienced by just one individual. Rather, the experience of Spears is an illustration of the wider societal problem of the objectification of all women and girls in capitalist society. Objectification is the process of reducing human beings to the status of a mere objects, it is a process of dehumanisation. In capitalist society today, the process of the objectification of women is carried out through a preoccupation with women's appearance above all other considerations and its harmful ideology is disseminated through advertising,



TV, magazines, music, movies etc. which all play a role in normalising the phenomenon which is adopted and replicated widely.

We won't take it anymore

However, there are positive indications arising from the current discussion around the treatment of Britney Spears. Namely, that there has been a massive shift in attitudes since the late 1990's and 2000's. Many young people, along with those who came of age with Spears, look back in horror at the hyper-sex-

ualisation of the star and her treatment by the media. Attitudes that were completely normalised at the time, are completely rejected by a large swathe of young people who are now supporting the #FreeBritney movement. New generations are getting active and organising against sexist conventions and oppression which can also be seen in the rise of the #MeToo movement.

The fact that attitudes have transformed over such a short period of time is testament to the power of mass organisation and shows the

potential for future struggles against the current organising of society around profit, to the detriment of humanity. As socialists, we understand that patriarchal structures and ideals are tools utilised by capitalism to maintain and justify inequality. Therefore, the struggle against this oppressive system necessitates a thorough understanding of, and fight back against, the oppression of women and all minorities as a central feature of organising ourselves with the rest of the working class.

Review: It's a Sin

directed by Russell T Davies

By Kevin Henry

THE BRILLIANT Channel 4 drama *It's A Sin* has struck a chord with many. Set during the '80s, the series shows hopeful scenes of young LGBTQ+ people enjoying their lives, before gradually becoming overshadowed by the emerging HIV/AIDS epidemic. Its tragic impact on their lives is felt keenly throughout, as is the disgusting shaming that went with it, rooted in the naked homophobia fostered by the Thatcher government, whose criminal indifference and inaction helped exacerbate the epidemic.

Creator Russell T Davies has noted that the period covered in the series began with LGBTQ+ people feeling that society was moving in the right direction, following the decriminalisation of homosexuality in Britain in 1967. However, the emergence of HIV/AIDS was an excuse for a cruel, conservative backlash. The series touches on how AIDS patients and their loved ones were treated - attempts by local authorities to detain patients under lock and key; families receiving homophobic abuse; partners being banned from funerals; funeral homes refusing those who lost their lives to AIDS; and families burning all the possessions of the de-



ceased. The scale of the crisis is illustrated by the harrowing scenes in the hospitals where AIDS patients are treated.

One of the key themes is the heartbreaking effect of a lack of information and, linked to that, the shame and stigma of having HIV. It shows people resorting to home 'remedies', including harmful substances such as battery acid. Most importantly, it deals with the consequences of not getting tested for fear of the stigma. The final episode brings home the reality that characters in the show -

and more importantly, countless numbers in the real world - could have been saved if, instead of hysteria and shaming, real public information campaigns had been combined with investment in prevention, treatment and research.

Davies's script doesn't centre around politics, but neither does it shy away from political issues. Some of the main characters help organise a march and 'die-In' protest outside a major pharmaceutical company that profits from HIV treatment, with one of the characters summing

it up: "We are dying and they profit." You are left with profound admiration for the people who were prepared to fight back against homophobia in this period. It is also important to remember that the victories for the LGBTQ+ community and the pushing back of LGBTQ-phobia in recent years did not fall from the sky, but was bitterly and courageously fought for over decades.

This is an edited version of a longer review available at socialistparty.ie

Remember Mark Ashton: Socialist & LGBTQ+ fighter

By Rory Howard

THE SOCIALIST Party supports the campaign for a plaque remembering renowned LGBTQ+ activist Mark Ashton to be erected in Portrush, his hometown. Mark - a socialist whose legacy is rooted in our ethos of class unity - died tragically from AIDS at the age of just 26 on 11 February 1987.

During the miners' strike of 1984-85, Mark stood in solidarity with the strikers and was involved in launching Lesbians & Gays Support the Miners (LGSM). He saw the mutual enemy the strikers and his community faced in Thatcher's government. The support from LGSM led the miners' union to campaign for repeal of Thatcher's homophobic Section 28.

Unsurprisingly, the DUP have responded to the campaign by slandering Mark Ashton's memory. We stand in solidarity with the campaigners and call upon the council to honour a local hero who fought for a better and more fair society.

the socialist

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