

FORWARD #27



A YOUNG VOICE FOR SOCIALISM

Youth Participation in Unions - USI - Sexual Abuse in the Workplace



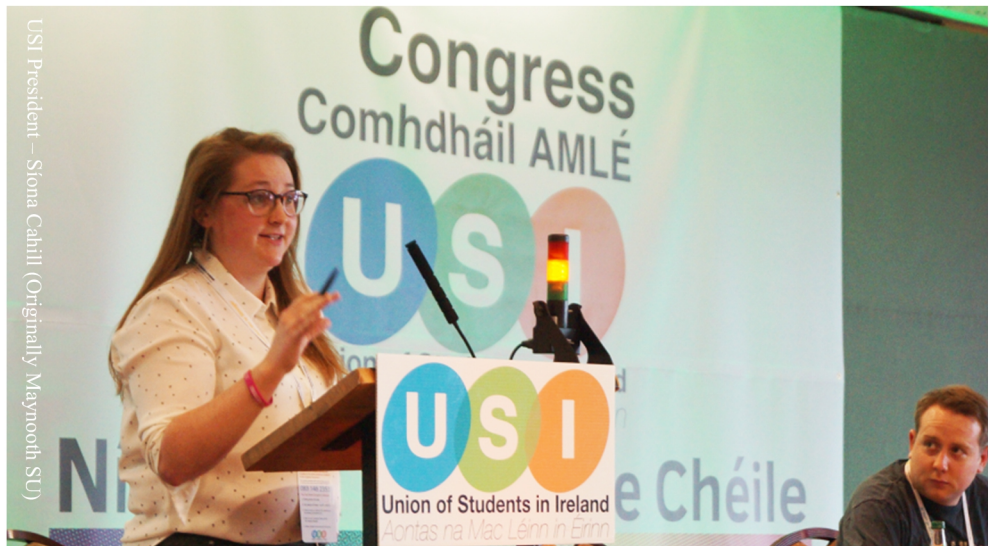
CONNOLLY YOUTH MOVEMENT

Union of Students in Ireland: Radicals or Opportunists?

Socialists in Ireland must ask themselves if the USI is genuinely an ally in our fight for the liberation of young people, or if it is just a bourgeois institution that can never deliver the needed material interests of young people in Ireland. I believe that rather than being a force for radical change in Ireland, the USI can and always will be a collection of ladder climbers and opportunists in the leadership, and aimless disenfranchised students at the bottom.

Ask the average member of the student population what the SU does, they will probably answer give out condoms and organise sex toy bingo (see NUI Galway's Students Union). Founded in 1959, The Union of Students in Ireland is the largest representation of Students in Ireland, across many of the various 3rd Level institutions. Irish SUs are so extremely institutionalised, most students cannot tell the difference between what falls within the responsibilities of the SU and what is the responsibility of the University. In fact, some of the members of the leadership don't even understand what is the jurisdiction of the SU. It is not a radical pressure group that lives outside the education system, but a large part of the University ecosystem.

One of the most successful things about the USI is its capacity to swing the outcome of a referendum. For example, the Marriage equality and Repeal of the 8th amendment saw record high turnout amongst young people. It can be argued that this is because SUs across the Republic encouraged an enabled students to register to vote, and allowed 66% majority in the referendum on the 8th amendment. Secondly, on the actual campus level, SUs do great work in regards to the



day to day interests of vulnerable groups. There are generally many small yet effective campaigns for gender neutral bathrooms, support groups, and anti racism efforts.

However, the USI can only go so far. For example in 2014 they claimed that Irish Water should have saved some of the €20,000 spent on its logo and re-branding by using a “cost effective micro-job website to pay an online seller to create a logo” rather than employing professional graphic designers. Obviously Irish Water are, to use a technical term, scum. However the fact that USI saw the issue here being the expense of a semi-state companies *labour* cost being the issue here is the kind of anti-corruption rhetoric we see out of the likes of Gemma O'Doherty. I'm not claiming that the USI are fascists like Gemma O'Doherty, however as a certain Soviet leader once told us, “Social Democracy is objectively the right-wing of Fascism” The USI supports valid identity politics struggles. However not only is USI not even claiming to be Socialist, it has been actively espousing anti-worker sentiment for years.

The Union of Students in Ireland has become a bourgeois institution. Several former prominent members have gone on to become elected officials, such as Pat Rabbitte and Eamon Gilmore. But let's look at an example of former USI president, Laura Harmon. Harmon spent her time in the USI advocating for the campaign for a Yes vote in the Same-sex marriage referendum. However, in September 2015

was appointed Women and Equality Officer for the Labour Party. A party that cut single parents allowance while in coalition with Fine Gael. Current USI President Siona Cahill has had connection to Fianna Fáil in the past. Their rhetoric and speeches of the USI and its leaders are meaningless. We see that they are all careerists and opportunists. Their actions, opinions and strategies show us they are bourgeois class collaborators that cannot be relied upon.

The USI has won victories for LGBT and Women's equality movements at a national level. However, we have reached a period where issues that directly effect people cannot be resolved by a national awareness and pressure campaign in the ways that Marriage Equality and Repeal campaigns were won. The USI is completely unable to answer any economic issues that affect not just these groups but also students and young people across the board; issues such as social housing, transgender health care or adequate mental health services. To put it simply. The USI can make wins in the area of identity politics, but it cannot and will never be able to counter Austerity measures within our colleges and universities. The leadership of the organisation are the exact type of technocratic “democratic” socialists that parties like Fianna Fáil and Labour love to have within their ranks, and because of this they will never act against the interests of bourgeois liberal parties, and by extension, the ruling class of capitalists that govern Ireland. FS



‘Young Girl’

Two years ago, not long after I began working in a restaurant in Belfast, a new manager came in. What happened between this man, who I will call Joe, for the sake of anonymity, and myself is an occurrence that is repeated often in workplaces both throughout Ireland and the world. I was 17 when Joe came to be General Manager, and almost immediately he started acting in a very inappropriate manner toward me.

He would stroke my hair and stand beside me with his hand resting on my back, he even said to me I was pretty and on one occasion, he told me I would make 'him too excited' and he would have to take 'his heart pills' for an upcoming work event so he could 'control' himself around me. These are a few examples of things Joe said to

me on a regular basis, but no one would stand up for me. What hurt about much of this situation is that my peers in work would agree that this was inappropriate and he made them feel uncomfortable, it just seemed like 'acceptable' behaviour. Then, at this work event Joe had mentioned before, he talked about my breasts in front of one of my supervisors and myself. The supervisor, John, laughed and later in the night said to me that he couldn't believe Joe had said this yet no one was willing to say anything on my behalf. John even refused to speak against him when, at a later stage, I had taken things further. Joe would often ask me to smile at him, not at customers but specifically at him. He would use intimidation and manipulation to get me to conform to what he wanted me to do. He would use his position of power to threaten me with losing my job, which I needed quite badly, and this was one of the reasons why I didn't stand up to him sooner. He would refer to me as 'girl' or 'young

girl', why he had to point out my gender or age is beyond me, but I believe this was all to do with his abuse of power and control over the employees of the business. Eventually, it got to the stage where I could no longer work in this restaurant.

In retrospect, Joe was a hindrance to both my physical and mental health and so when I wrote my letter of complaint about him and resigned, I took the issue to a law advisory body on Children's Rights, because during all of this I was still only 17. This body sent an application to the courts and the Equality Commission cold called me and asked to help with the case. If they hadn't approached me about what was going on I don't think I would be fortunate enough to have even come this far. One year later and I am lucky to say that the issue has been resolved with the company, but Joe is still General Manager – has justice really prevailed?

ANON



Youth Participation & Youth Employment

Youth participation in unions in 2012 sat below 5% in Ireland (Vandaele, 2013), with this fact being mirrored in numerous countries around the EU. There are numerous possible explanations for this fact, but in this article I want to focus on one in particular.

When thinking about it, it might seem at first that young people may not have a good view of unions as a result of cultural and media biases against them, but this doesn't seem to be true. The Journal.ie held three separate polls on the Nurses and Midwives strike between December 2018, and January 2019, with all three resulting in approval of over 75% in each, with Keune (2013), finding that in all countries surveyed, with the exception of Spain, young people almost always viewed trade unions in a positive light.

Going deeper, youth unemployment seems the most likely factor in lack of union participation by young people. This doesn't seem to be the case, either. In Ireland, youth unemployment sits at about 14.8%, as opposed to the general unemployment rate of 5.3%. This is similar to the UK, sitting at 11.2% and 4% respectively. However, in 2013 in the UK, union membership sat at 25.6% for all workers, but only 7.7% for workers aged 16-24, and 21% for workers aged 25-34. (Keune, 2013) This demonstrates that it is likely there is another factor at play.

This factor, it seems to me, anyway, is the type of employment that young people find themselves. Vandaele states that 41.2% of young workers in the EU are employed in temporary jobs, and a further 31.1% work part-time. In her 1995 study, Arleen Hernández showed that, while the effect was small, part-time employment reduced the likelihood of union membership, while in his 2000 study, Kalleberg found that precariousness in employment led to a significant reduc-

tion in union membership, if not a total loss to the right of union membership in some cases. This would seem to explain why youth participation in trade unions is so low, at the very least in the nations where it is demonstrably low, if not also in Ireland.

However, this is not to say that low youth participation is all, or even mostly the fault of unions. Rather, there are many reasons why young people may not join unions. Considering so many are in precarious or temporary employment, their livelihoods may not be reliant on their employment at all, and they may have little interest in joining a union as a result, the benefits of unionising maybe not hitting quite as close to home as someone reliant on their income (Hernández, 1995). Further, as demonstrated by Keune (2013) in his investigations of Spanish young people, young people may not view unions as the forces for change they once most certainly were, choosing instead to engage in movements outside of unions, such as Take Back the City, or non-union organisations such as Young Friends of the Earth. Another reason may be that if a young person works part time during university, they may not see much point in joining a union at all, since there is quite a high likelihood they may move to another employer, or need to leave work entirely.

This then raises the question: how do you increase youth participation in unions? According to Mason and Bain (1993), the more active unions are, the more able they will be to recruit. It would follow, then, that specifically pursuing issues that relate to younger workers, such as more regular hours, higher wages, more stable employment, and even issues that affect them outside of employment, such as the housing crisis, university access, climate change, and innumerable other issues, would be conducive to higher youth participation in unions. Even if not, it would serve to produce significant goodwill and connections between these social movements and workers' organisations. RF

An Ireland Without Unions is an Ireland Without Revolution

For a decade now, the people of Ireland, North and South of the border have been crucified by a cabal of political parties wedded to the interests of capitalists. For a decade, cuts have been inflicted against the most vulnerable in society in order to “balance the budget”. For a decade, trade unions have not been actively recruiting into their unions from the waves of people joining the workforce. Trade Union membership has dramatically declined and with it so has the share of wealth workers receive for their work. What does that mean?

In practice it means that when a worker heads out for a days work, they make a wage – this wage is a predetermined amount they've agreed with their employer in exchange for a set amount of hours or a piece rate of work done. The trend in Ireland for the last 25 years is that the share of the wealth the worker gets in the form of their wage or other benefits has steadily declined. This decline is in conjunction with the decline of union membership and the amount of days workers go on strike.

According to TASC, wealth inequality in Ireland is rampant with their report 'The Distribution of Wealth' stating that 72.7% of the net wealth is held by the top 20% in Irish society. The bottom half of the population has 5% of the wealth. These stark numbers may not mean a lot, but what it in effect means is that wealth is concentrated in the hands of an ever growing minority of people in Ireland while the rest of us get bread crumbs.

How is that relevant to the trade union movement and its decline is the most immediate question worth asking. Well – a trade union is a voluntary body of workers and unemployed people that represents their interests, primarily but not exclusively against employers. They represent their inter-

ests by defending them, as a group, against any attempts to cut their wages, manipulate their conditions or mistreat them. They also represent their interests by lodging requests for pay increases when the enterprise they are working in is performing well. If the workers are working hard and as a result of this hard work an enterprise is doing well – then they deserve a greater share of the wealth they create. Another important feature in the decline of union activity and radicalism have been 'social partnership' deals which effectively lock trade unions into ensuring their members do not engage in radical or militant action. In exchange for this shepherding, the state guarantees pay increases. One could call it naivety – somebody else could call it class collaboration, what-

ever you call it, the emphasis of any-bodies analysis should be on the consequences of the strategy ICTU has taken in the last 25 years. The consequences are mentioned above but to repeat and summarize, a rapid decline in industrial action and union density has befallen the union movement. Therein lies the problem. A secondary and supplementary issue would be the influence the Labour Party of Ireland continue to exert within the Trade Union movement. The Labour Party has been in coalition with Fine Gael and overseen the most ruthless of austerity, despite all of this SIPTU continues to be affiliated to it. Taking into consideration these issues – the tasks of revolutionaries seem straightforward. If most workers in Ireland, North and South, are not organ-



ever you call it, the emphasis of anybody's analysis should be on the consequences of the strategy ICTU has taken in the last 25 years. The consequences are mentioned above but to repeat and summarize, a rapid decline in industrial action and union density has befallen the union movement. Therein lies the problem. A secondary and supplementary issue would be the influence the Labour Party of Ireland continue to exert within the Trade Union movement. The Labour Party has been in coalition with Fine Gael and overseen the most ruthless of austerity, despite all of this SIPTU continues to be affiliated to it.

Taking into consideration these issues – the tasks of revolutionaries seem straightforward. If most workers in Ireland, North and South, are not organised or represented, then what is it that we as the spiritual followers of James Connolly set about doing? What exactly is our task and solution to the epidemic within the trade union movement?

For some time now, the Connolly Youth Movement and all its members have made a concerted effort to educate our members in the importance of trade unions. Our research and engage-

ment with young people concludes that most people in the age bracket of the CYM (16-30) now no longer even know what a trade union movement is, or what it does, or how do you join one.



We set about the task of educating our own members as to what trade unions are. In all our branches we ran workshops on what unions are and how to engage with other young people on encouraging them to join. We have made union membership a mandatory element of CYM membership but after actually explaining why one should join a union and its benefits. Subsequently – we have made union organising and industrial organising a key aspect of

the strategy that the CYM has towards changing Ireland. We have done so because electoral politics have not delivered a greater share of the wealth for the working class in Ireland, we have collectively become poorer in the last decade. In order to reconsolidate the position of our class and strengthen its position we believe that union re-growth and union re-organisation should be at the heart of any moves to change Ireland.

The ruling class will tremble significantly more when we organise workers across all sectors of the economy and can at the desired moment grind the economy to a halt. That, in my view is one very important expression of class power that is far above and beyond winning seats here and there and that is crucially why, the Connolly Youth Movement will continue to organise union workshops and actively recruit to trade unions we believe are politically principled and attempting to change the tide.

As a movement committed to transferring the ownership of society to the working class, re-energizing the union movement and rebuilding it is one of the first steps we are going to focus on. AH

Cover Graphic by M. Courtney-Lee

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The Connolly Youth Movement is a youth organisation committed to fighting for democracy, freedom and unity in this country. The CYM takes part in the struggle to build socialism in Ireland and everywhere around the globe.

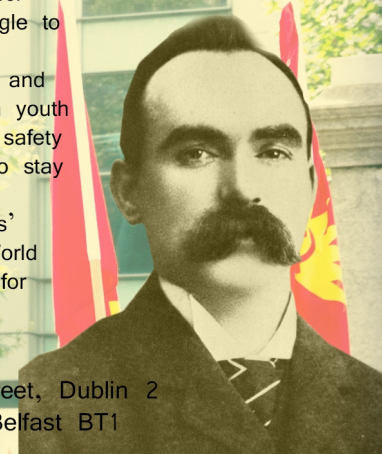
Since 2008 the crisis in Ireland has deepened which has seen many talented and gifted young people leave this island in search of a better life abroad. We as a youth organisation are fundamentally opposed to any government using its youth as a safety valve in trying to ease economic and political tensions. So we are determined to stay and fight the injustice brought on this and future generations.

Working with progressive movements to develop young workers' and students' consciousness in their own proud history and culture. As a member of the World Federation of Democratic Youth we struggle in opposition to imperialism and for liberation around the globe of all oppressed peoples, including ourselves.

The CYM has branches in Dublin, Belfast and Cork.

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