here is growing concern among trade unionists that the statutory protection mechanisms which set the wage levels for more than 300,000 Irish workers could be dismantled. For decades, Joint Labour Committees, involving unions and employers, have set out the Employment Regulation Orders (ERO’s) which regulate wages for mainly low paid workers. The ERO’s and Registered Employment Agreements (REA’s) set wage levels in the construction, retail, catering, security, hotel and tourism sectors of the economy.

Under the terms of the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) negotiated with the EU/ECB/IMF Troika in December, the Fianna Fáil led government agreed to review the statutory wage setting mechanisms. The chairman of the Labour Court, Kevin Duffy, and UCD economist, Dr Frank Walsh, submitted their findings to the Minister for Enterprise and Employment, Richard Bruton, at the end of April.

The Minister has stated that he intends to publish the report after it is considered by the Government and that discussions will take place with the European Commission on its main findings “in line with the provisions in the EU-IMF programme.”

“It is proposed to have early discussions with the European Commission services on the main findings of the review, in line with the provisions of the EU-IMF programme,” he told the Dáil on Thursday (5th May).

The Minister added that arising from those discussions he would present a “time-bound” comprehensive action plan to the Troika by the end of September. This plan, he said, would follow up on the report’s recommendations, setting out proposals for any legislative action that might be necessary to give effect to the reform measures.

The minister said that the terms of reference for the review set by the previous government had referred to “anomalies, obsolete provisions and inflexibilities” in the wage setting mechanisms which would have to be addressed. He also warned that the changes to the Joint Labour Committees and Registered Employment Agreements would apply generally rather than only to new entrants.

“THERE are real grounds for concern that the wage setting mechanisms will be dismantled and that the previous government had indeed discussed their complete elimination with the IMF,” said SIPTU General President, Jack O’Connor.

“In December the IMF staff report referred to a ‘review with a view to elimination’ of the wage setting mechanisms. It is widely suspected that the previous government had accept-ed this outcome which would be an unprecedented assault on the wages of more than 300,000 already low paid workers.”

He said he had yet to receive a response from Fianna Fáil leader, Michael Martin, to a request he made last month for clarification on the commitments given to the IMF on this issue.
Contract cleaners issue May Day call to Organise!

By ETHEL BUCKLEY

Contract cleaner Lucia Fay stole the show at this year’s May Day rally in Dublin with an impassioned call to workers to organise in response to the current threat to Employment Regulation Orders. Lucia, who was the opening speaker at the rally, gave a rousing speech showing no sign of nerves in what was her first public speaking engagement. She attended the rally as part of a large, colourful and noisy contingent from the Fair Deal for Cleaners Campaign.

Lucia told of her experience in building a union at her place of work with the support of SIPTU Organisers and the difference it has made to her and her colleagues at Beaumont Hospital.

“We strengthened in numbers week after week. formed a workplace committee, and asked management to address our concerns. When they didn’t take our request seriously, we decided to make them listen—we took a ballot for strike action. And you know what? They listened.” Lucia said.

Lucia then went on to outline the new threat to low paid workers contained in the review of sectoral wage agreements. Her message was clear; particularly with regard to protecting existing payments for weekend working. Reminding the audience that the basic hourly rate for cleaners set by the ERO is only €9.50 per hour she declared to tumultuous applause: “We didn’t cause this crisis and we shouldn’t be the ones to pay for it. Our rate of pay is already too low. You see unlike the politicians, and the bankers and the developers and their friends in the legal profession the Celtic Tiger never called to our door. He by-passed us on his way to the Galway Tent! That little extra we get for working on a Sunday—a day when we should be spending time with our families—currently ensures we still have food on our plates the following Friday.”

She then called on SIPTU and the trade union movement as well as the Labour Party to stand “shoulder to shoulder” with low paid workers in defence of ERO’s and concluded with a clarion call to all to organise to build a better future for all workers: “So Comrades lets enjoy this May Day celebration. let’s prepare for the battle ahead, and above all lets organise!”

Wages under threat from EU/IMF

The Labour Party has since succeeded in securing a commitment in the Programme for Government to retain the statutory wage protection infrastructure much to the annoyance of employers group. Ibec. Ibec had called for the abolition of the ERO’s, a reform of the REA’s and the retention of the cut to the minimum wage, which the new government has promised will be reversed. Ibec also criticised as “one of the most objectionable aspects of the JLC system: the retention of the casting vote by the chairman of a JLC.”

The threat to wage levels across the economy is compounded by the details emerging in the EU Competitiveness Pact which is being promoted by German chancellor, Angela Merkel and French president, Nicolas Sarkozy. The Pact envisages a depression of wage levels across the EU and seeks to give the EU commission power over wage bargaining processes in individual member states. Addressing trade unionists in Dublin on Wednesday (4th May) European Trade Union Congress economist, Ronald Jansen, said that the Pact sought to “depress wages” by enacting into EU law a process whereby the lower wages of a “competitor” EU state would set a benchmark for the pay levels of neighbouring countries.

“it is vitally important to understand that the threat to wage levels is not limited to the 300,000 plus workers who are directly in the firing line. Apart from cutting the pay of the most vulnerable workers in the country the whole exercise is to dismantle the threshold of decency that this statutory infrastructure represents so as to facilitate the collapse of pay levels in the economy in accordance with the objectives of the so called Competitiveness Pact.” Jack O’Connor said.

In parallel with these developments a High Court decision is pending on a case taken by the Fast Food Alliance challenging the legitimacy of the current ERO in the catering industry on both procedural and constitutional grounds. Another four court challenges to the ERO’s and REA’s are also underway and may influence the Governments proposed action plan.
Dáil protest at threat to Home Help services

HOME Help services are in danger of being privatised and the terms and conditions of union members are also under threat. SIPTU has claimed.

The union has called on all its members in the Home Help sector – as well as their clients, families and those who want to see quality services for the elderly and vulnerable citizens – to add their voice to its campaign.

SIPTU Health Division Sector Organiser Louise O’Reilly said: “On 26th April we marched to the Dáil to highlight the fact that while our politicians were on holidays our home helps and their supporters were prepared to voice their support for quality services we are holding another protest to the Dáil on Thursday, 12th May.”

She pointed out that the Health Service Executive was currently engaged in a tendering process. “We believe this will impact on our members’ terms and conditions and that it is a clear attempt to drive down wages and conditions.” Information on the tender is not available to the public yet the process will determine how hundreds of millions of tax payers’ euro is spent.

Louise O’Reilly added: “Our home helps deserve better. “Our older persons and vulnerable clients deserve better. Join us at the Dáil on the 12th May – add your voice to the call to protect our services and protect those who deliver services.

“We will be handing in a letter of protest to the Government and urging them to insist that the HSE protects our services, our wages, our conditions and our jobs!”

New look SIPTU website

Watch out for re-launched SIPTU website for the latest online news and features, www.siptu.ie

Countess Markievicz School

Saturday 4th June 2011

The Teachers’ Club, 36 Parnell Square West, Dublin 1

Concerned about the declining numbers of women in public and political life and inspired by a flippant comment, the Countess Markievicz School was born. In honour of Ireland’s first female MP and Cabinet Minister, the school is a discussion forum on women in Ireland, with a different topic addressed each year. This year’s theme is Women in Politics & the Media.

We have invited a range of speakers from academia, politics and the media, to speak on June 4th. We invite you to join us for some lively debate to engage with the issues. A Q & A session will follow each panel discussion and a glass of wine will finish the day!

SPEAKERS ON THE DAY

Prof. Kathleen Lynch, Equality Studies, UCD
Margaret E. Ward, Financial Journalist & Broadcaster
Siobhán O’ Donoghue, Director, MRCI
Dr. Mary McAuliffe, Historian, Women’s Studies, UCD
Joan Collins, T.D., Dublin South Central
Helen McCormack, Journalist & Radio Producer
Ailbhe Smyth, Feminist Open Forum
Dr. Elaine Byrne, School of Politics, Trinity College

Booking

There is no admission charge to the event, however, booking is highly recommended as places are limited. To book please email your name to countessmarkievicz@gmail.com

Registration is from 9.30am, with the first speaker at 10am. Panel discussions to include Gender Quotas, Women & Politics, First Wave Feminism and Women & the Media. Final panel times & speakers to be published closer to the event.
Busy 8 months for NI District

By Scott Millar

THE Northern Ireland District has experienced a very vibrant and busy ant eight months after a period of restructuring.

In December, we elected a new North of Ireland District Committee and its members have been working tirelessly ever since, helping to raise the profile of our district not just in the North but also within SIPTU as a whole.

There are now five full-time employees here in the Belfast Hub – a big increase – and the office certainly is a lot busier and noisier, with a big increase – and the office employees here in the Belfast Hub – a whole.

Among those leading the push for Boots management to engage constructively with their workforce in creating a better working environment is SIPTU Belfast shop steward Shelly Doloughan.

Shelly, who has worked for the company for over 15 years, said: “We want to create a better working environment for both workers and management and this will be brought about by engagement on issues of concern.”

Mother of two Shelly went to SIPTU a year ago to assist with a personal employment query. Following a successful resolution to the issue, she joined the union and has since assisted in organising a workplace committee.

The committee has called on management to agree a “dignity and respect” policy.

Before becoming active in SIPTU, Shelly had little experience of trade unions, beyond having a father who was a member when he worked at Mackies engineering plant.

However, she now sees the absolute necessity for trade union organisation.

Shelly said: “Workplaces are going to have to get organised.”

“Trade unionism would seem to have been left behind for a while but there is a definite need for it again due to the change in management attitudes I have seen since I began my working career.”

“Previously, there was much more consideration of workers, they were trusted to do their work and there was a good atmosphere.”

The Fair Play for Boots Workers (SIPTU’s Insolvency and Finance Sector Organiser, Adrian Kane, has described the scale of payments made to former Allied Irish Bank managing director, Colm Doherty, as “truly staggering”. He said: “The maximum a PAYE worker would receive in lieu of notice would be one week’s pay for the equivalent length of time that Colm Doherty served as managing director and for which he received €707,000.”

“It would appear that the Board then decided to make a payment of €2 million in order to circumvent the rather timid reforms introduced by the last Government to prevent top executives evading tax on their enormous pensions.”

“The revelation in relation to Colm Doherty’s truly staggering payout, coupled with the publication of the Nyberg Report on 19th April paints a picture of a self-serving elite of top executives evading tax on their enormous pensions.”

The committee has called on management to reconsider its unaccept-able proposal and to engage with the workers on issues of concern.

By Scott Millar

AN initiative to organise unemployed union members has been undertaken by SIPTU’s Manufacturing Division.

A successful first open day for unemployed members was held in Liberty Hall on 14th April with further meetings to be held and a rep-resentative committee elected.

Ray Stanley, of SIPTU’s Manufacturing Division, said: “Our division has been hit hard by the return of mass unemployment with numerous factory closures.”

In light of this it was decided to organise our unemployed members so they can better have their interest represented and to keep union policy informed of the difficul-ties they face.”

He added: “There had previously been a lack of contact with our unemployed members beyond public campaigns.

“The idea behind this initiative is to keep members active within the union and playing their part as many want to do.”

It is intended that SIPTU unemployed members will be able to receive advice on training and education as well as assist in lobbying campaigns on the need for effective job creation policies.

The members will also be able to raise issues within the union concerning the position of the unemployed and partake in other SIPTU activities.

It is understood other SIPTU divisions are now considering following the Manufacturing Division’s lead in organising their own unemployed members.
THEY came to rape and pillage the wealth of Ireland but a thousand years later the Vikings are giving something back, with a revival of their ancient boat-making crafts aimed at providing new job opportunities in the Waterford area.

In the construction of Skuldelev 6 – an exact replica of a Viking shallow water longboat – skills first honed in the fjords of Scandinavia a millennium ago are being revived.

Begun in May 2010, the project is scheduled to be completed this year with the longboat launched on the river Suir.

“This is all hands on work. We are learning a lot of different skills constructing the boat, including carpentry and forge work,” said Anthony Browne, who was made redundant from his builders’ providers job of over 20 years in 2009 and one of 18 participants in the project.

Another is Michael Dunne, who worked as an architectural technician for 12 years until his Limerick-based employer began a process of closing down late in 2009.

“This is one of the best things I’ve done in the last few years. We got a set of drawings from the museum in Roskiel where the remains of the original boat are maintained.

“The early part of the job was lofting the boat, which is drawing out in full size the templates for the various parts such as the planks and keel.”

Made out of oak with an overall length of 39 feet, the men learned to shape the one-and-quarter-inch planks of the clinker-built boat’s hull through a process of steaming the wood before bending it into shape with clamps.

Traditional building tools such as adzes and hand axes, used for centuries by shipwrights, are being utilised in the boat’s construction.

Nails for the clinker-built vessel are also being forged at the Kilcohan boat building yard where work is overseen by course co-ordinator Michael Power and shipwright Michael Kennedy.

It is hoped the participants will be able to man the 14 oarsman boat on its completion after participating in a basic sailing courses in Dunmore East.

With the skills learned in the boat’s construction, the participants will then seek employment in the boat building and repair sector as well as traditional furniture making.

The final stages of work on the Skuldelev 6 will be open to public viewing when the vessel goes on display in Blackfriars Abbey in Waterford city for the July tall ships festival.

Along with the Skuldelev 6, the course participants have also built three other craft, including a Newfoundland Dory, a traditional fishing craft which recalls the strong traditional links between the south east of Ireland and the Canadian province.

The Waterford Longboat Project is a FÁS Community Local Training Initiative in partnership with Waterford Museum of Treasures, Waterford City Council, Waterford Chamber of Commerce and the private sector.
FORMER hotel general manager Denise Batt, left, was awarded an unprecedented €100,000 by the Equality Tribunal last year. The tribunal found that her employer Palmece – trading as the Comfort Inn, Parnell Square, Dublin – had victimised and discriminated against her during her two pregnancies.

Denise joined the Comfort Inn hotel in November 2003 and initially enjoyed a good working relationship with her employer.

But after she announced she was expecting a child in January 2006, her work was micro-supervised which led to health problems in the later stages of her pregnancy. On Denise’s return to work in 2007, she again became pregnant shortly after.

Around this time she was overlooked for promotion and, in a later interview, was simply informed that the position had gone “to a better person”. The tribunal heard the company ignored all requests for the official criteria of the interview. Following a change of ownership at the hotel, Denise was placed in a position where she was forced to resign.

The tribunal took into account when making the award the fact that the discrimination lasted through two pregnancies and that the claimant felt victimised to the point that she suffered serious illness.

The award – compensation for distress experienced – was finally paid at the end of 2010.

Meeting sought over arts project funding

SIPTU has organised a campaign to protect jobs and services in the community and voluntary sector in Northern Ireland following the loss of 3,000 jobs.

Public meetings have already taken place in Omagh, Derry and Belfast in recent months with additional events planned elsewhere.

It is widely recognised that those who work in the community and voluntary sector provide vital services to the most disadvantaged in society. One in 10 community sector workers have lost their jobs over the last two years with a resulting impact on the delivery of vital services.

SIPTU learned recently of the reduction, and even removal, of funding to several vital community sector organisations including Art Ability, based in the West Belfast interface of Agnes Street.

Art Ability is a cross-community group catering for both children and adults, most of whom have special needs.

While state funding has been removed, the organisation’s dedicated workers have remained at their posts determined to ensure that the most vulnerable are not allowed to suffer because of an uncaring bureaucratic decision.

SIPTU Community Sector organiser, Martin O’Rourke, said the union had sought a meeting with the incoming Minister for Health, to discuss the withdrawal of funding from the project.

“SIPTU has written to the Minister to seek an urgent meeting to have this decision reversed with immediate effect. However, if the Minister’s office fails to engage in a positive and constructive manner, we will lead a delegation of workers, the service users and their families to present the Minister with the wonderful banner the children have made to illustrate the impact of the cuts on their lives. “I hope this will not be necessary and we look forward to a positive and constructive engagement with the new Minister.” he added.
Study will tease out who Ireland owes and how much

By Scott Millar

A STUDY to find out the names of the organisations and individuals to whom the Irish national debt is owed will publish its preliminary findings next month.

The “national debt audit” will provide a clearer picture as to whom more than €100 billion in debt is owed, when it was incurred, how much of it is senior, guaranteed and subordinated debt, as well as when repayment is due to each creditor.

“The first exercise of debt management is to determine who you owe, how much you owe and how the debt came about,” said Unite Irish Regional Secretary Jimmy Kelly.

“Three years after the Irish government bought a ‘pig in a poke’ preferred by senior bankers, all of whom are now gone with massive pay-offs, we still do not know who is owed. “Irish civil society deserves better and we are tired of waiting for those who should have undertaken this audit. Everyone who is being forced to pay for the mistakes of a small elite will at least know who is being funded by their pay cuts, tax increases and austerity,” Kelly added.

The audit will follow similar processes undertaken in Greece and other deeply indebted countries. It will be led by Dr Sheila Killean, Head of Department and Senior Lecturer in Accounting and Finance at the University of Limerick and supported by SIPTU, other unions and civil society groups.

Focusing particularly on the private bank debt subsumed into public responsibility by the September 2008 bank guarantee, the independent audit will seek to give a clear understanding of the level of Ireland’s debt and its implications.

Debt and Development Coalition Ireland spokesperson Nessa Ní Chowla said: “Debt audits can be a powerful tool to support civil society accessing information on the debts of their countries to judge for themselves whether the debts should be paid, and the implications of any payment or non-payment decisions.”

Launching the audit in Dublin on 4th May, the study’s sponsors said they aimed to have it completed by the end of the summer with preliminary findings released publicly in June.

EU-wide plan to drive down wages exposed

By Scott Millar

A PLAN to drive down wages throughout Europe has been hatched by the German and French governments.

Under the title of the EU Competitiveness Pact, the plan seeks to give the EU Commission power over wage bargaining processes in individual member states.

Addressing trade unionists in Dublin on 4th May, European Trade Union Congress (ETUC) economist Ronald Jansen said that the Pact sought to “degress wages” by enacting into EU law a process whereby the lower wages of a ‘competitor’ EU state would set a benchmark for neighbouring countries’ pay levels.

The Pact also seeks to weaken central bargaining processes and convert cuts in public sector wages into private sector pay reductions. The central aim was to create a downward spiral in wages throughout the Eurozone and seven other EU states that have signed up to it.

He added that this policy was an attempt to “replace currency devaluation with wage devaluation” as a way out of the economic crisis. However, it takes no account of individual or national debt levels. The approach will result in a cut in worker’s living standards. But it’s flawed logic would also have damaging economic effects – decreasing domestic demand and lowering wages.

He concluded that this would lead to more mortgage and personal debt defaults resulting in greater pressure on the banks – and actually a larger debt problem.”

Other changes to labour laws under the Pact could see the pension age rise to that of the highest among the signed-up states and the end of sector-wide pay agreements. The Pact also seeks to place budget restrictions on member states and give the EU Commission greater say over the formation of economic policy in individual states.

Signed-up states which fail to conform to the Commission’s stipulations would face massive penalties. Offending states will have to pay 0.2% of their GDP into a non-interest bearing account. If they do not follow Commission rulings concerning labour market convergence, they will lose this money as a fine.

This procedure can be repeated up to a fine of 0.5% of GDP (around €100 million for Ireland).

The Pact fits into wider moves to remodel European economies in what European Commission president Emmanuel Barroso has dubbed a “silent revolution.” The EU is campaigning against the Competitive Pact on a Europe-wide level seeking to highlight its effects on ordinary workers and the overheating powers it will give the EU Commission over the internal policies of sovereign states.

“Three years after the Irish government bought a pig in a poke, the ETUC economist Ronald Jansen outlined how EU Competitive Pact will hit wages” - Picture: Paula Geraghty
May Day march success in sunny Belfast and Derry

HUNDREDS of SIPTU members joined thousands of marchers to celebrate May Day in Belfast and Derry. In his address, SIPTU General President Jack O’Connor said the trade union movement had warned that the austerity programme would not work and would only deepen the economic crisis. He predicted the EU/ECB/IMF package and the effort to save the banks would threaten the long-term survival of the economy.

Marcher Pat McCauley, a SIPTU community worker and activist from Belfast, said: “It was great to see this cross-community event attended by working people from across Belfast. Throughout the worst times of the Troubles, the trade union movement was one of the main forces that continued to work towards improving working people’s lives. We were also aware that when we required public services, the trade union movement would best ensure they were available. “That is why I am proud to march with my SIPTU colleagues today.”

Barry McColgan, a SIPTU community activist who travelled from Omagh to attend the event, added: “I attended today to join with others who believe the trade union movement is vital to the shaping of a fairer society with justice for all.”

In Belfast there were a range of activities to mark May Day including an evening of culture through music, verse and words. Wittern Francis Devine, from the Irish Labour History Society, recalled the lives and contributions of Jim Larkin, James Connolly, Winnie Carney and other labour activists and explored their legacy in relation to current economic and social realities.

A specially-cast limited edition badge to commemorate 100 years of Connolly’s arrival in Belfast was also launched.

AROUND 700 people turned out to celebrate May Day in Dublin on Sunday 1st May.

The colourful parade was led by members of the SIPTU Don’t Bin Our ERO Campaign carrying balloons and chanting loudly, proudly pushing their wheelie bins in front. Trade union flags and banners added to the colour on the parade.

The upbeat mood of the crowd was in stark contrast to the sombre theme for this year’s parade – Resist Austerity.

When we assembled outside Liberty Hall, we heard from the President of the Dublin Trades Council, Phil McFadden, who reminded those present that the word austerity was one which had recently come into vogue but which has different meanings for workers than for business people.

“Austerity means a €3 million pay off to some and to others a reduction to the minimum wage,” he said.

He also spoke about the need for workers to unite in the face of this austerity and to remember – especially on May Day – that workers have much that unites them regardless of whether they work in the public or the private sector.

He introduced Lucia Fay, a contract cleaner working in Beaumont Hospital. Lucia spoke with great passion about how essential it is to ensure that the EROs are protected because for many people a few hours working on a Sunday means they can make ends meet.

She paid tribute to SIPTU for campaigning on behalf of workers and, to loud applause, told us about the positive impact the campaign has had on the workers in Beaumont Hospital who are getting organised.

Lucia’s address was followed by a short play from the Domestic Workers Action Group which was very warmly received.

We also heard from Mary Lou McDonald (Sinn Fein) and Joan Collins (ULA) who both spoke about the need for workers to unite against the Government’s austerity programme and the attack by employers on employment rights.

Proceedings ended with a speech by Sam Nolan, who has addressed every May Day rally since 1954, and who spoke passionately about the spirit of May Day and the need for international solidarity between workers.

He also spoke about the need for workers to be organised in their unions and in their workplaces.
AN EXTRA €1 billion a year could be raised by a levy on incomes of more than €100,000 to invest in job creation through the Government’s proposed State Investment Bank, SIPTU General President Jack O’Connor has said.

He made his comments at the Jim Connell festival in Crossakiel, Co Meath, on April 31st.

“High earners who are levied through the tax code would receive a dividend on the performance of the funds and could ultimately hope to get their money back”, he added.

In a wide ranging speech, Jack O’Connor, who is also Congress President, warned that growth was the only means by which Ireland could avoid default.

He cautioned against those who saw default as a quick fix for the economy in the same way that deflationary austerity has been promoted as a fast route to solvency and economic recovery since 2008.

“It is tactically and strategically wrong for the left to assert that we do not have options within the, admittedly restrictive, Troika Agreement with the IMF, ECB and EU. Those on the right do not think so. They had no sooner secured the recent further commitment of €24 billion for the banks when they returned to their favourite target – emasculating public services.

“The left must seize the initiative, suspend consideration of default and concentrate on the only question that matters – how to grow the economy, providing jobs and hope for our people.”

Jack O’Connor pointed out that concerns over consumer confidence, home protection and private sector pensions must be addressed urgently and were capable of resolution.

“But the real key is jobs, jobs and more jobs. This cannot be addressed in the absence of investment.”

Gross fixed capital formation had fallen from €46.456 billion in 2007 to €19.838 billion last year.

Jack O’Connor claimed that as private sector investment retreated, it was imperative to find a way for public intervention to come to the fore.

He also warned that the sale of state assets at bargain basement prices would not work.

“We must articulate a better, fairer way. This is where the concept of the Strategic Investment Bank (SIB) enters the stage”.

A residue of €1 billion to €1.5 billion remained in the Pension Reserve Fund and this “should be immediately transferred to set up the SIB”. He added: “A further €1 billion per annum could be raised by a tiered levy on all incomes over €100K per annum”.

Admitting that a conventional levy was precluded by Fine Gael’s no tax increase commitment to the better off, Jack O’Connor argued that funds for job creation could be raised if the tax code provided a dividend based on their performance and that ultimately contributors could hope to recoup their money.

“A €3 billion venture capital fund comprised of €2 billion from the NPRF and €1 billion from the levy would increase investment in the economy by 16% this year”, he said.

“The same should be done again next year and at least €2 billion should be penned in for 2013.

“Those opposed to taxing the wealthy always cite the negative implications for retaining such people in Ireland.

“This risk would be reduced if they could be assured it would only last for a limited period”, he added.

People on high incomes would doubtlessly complain, but they would get the money back.

“In any event they will lose a great deal more in a disorderly default.”

He also underlined how the multiplier effect of funds focused on job generation and the savings on social benefit would be also significant.

Jack O’Connor added: “The bottom line is that there is no way out of the current mess without jobs and there will be no jobs without growth, and there will be no growth without investment.

“We can follow the pied pipers down the spiral of austerity and deflation condemning thousands of our people to on-going unemployment, emigration, misery and despair.

“But on the other hand we can be innovative and co-operate generating jobs, growth and hope.

“One is the social solidarity route, the other entails recourse to social cannibalism.”
Ireland’s folly in not reining in its banks

By Martin Fitzpatrick

The Nyberg Report on the causes of the banking crisis in Ireland, published last month, came in for a rather selective but considerable battering. It was faulted because it did not, in the old journalistic cliché, “name the guilty men”. Instead it spread the blame. It saw mistakes – disastrous mistakes – all over the shop.

Despite the media onslaught against workers for the past three years Nyberg did not place them or their unions at the scene of the banking crisis. During the boom, the report concludes, households and investors lost any sense of value. Banks became sloppy, unprofessional, greedy and inept and the lenders to these banks threw diligence out the window.

The banking regulator, the Government and the Central Bank were too timid and/or too stupid to stop these risky practices. Parliament sleepwalked through the process and the media – the great bulwark with its self-assigned task of holding others to account – sat, cheered and largely dismissed the warnings that what was going on and that it was utterly unsustainable.

Nyberg, without putting faces on the perpetrators of this national outrage, makes it clear that many more decision-makers were responsible than were prepared to face up to their part in the collapse.

Principal Nyberg nails the most common excuse, which was “nobody told us”. So the blame must reside elsewhere.

That excuse sits very comfortably with the position of the national newspapers.

Irish newspapers, for instance, creamed millions and millions from property advertising and, as they did so, massaged the boom with an editorial encouragement that often verged on the pornographic.

It was in the interests of the newspaper industry to see the Celtic Tiger starved of its sustenance, concomitantly warning signs in the newspapers about the dangers of what was going on were few and far between.

In many respects the property sections were a reflection of management prejudices masquerading as independent editorial.

It must be said that the media was not the only careless cheerleader, but it was a seriously negligent one. Nyberg states that it was the job of the decision makers to make sure they were well informed.

‘Accepting’ one’s own ignorance or inefficiency does not transfer responsibility onto others: instead it puts an extra demand on the decision makers to obtain good advice. It goes without saying that this advice, gloomy and unwelcome as it might be, should be passed on.

Looking at the current line-up of decision makers, one would hope that the key message of Nyberg is being heeded.

Judging by the comments of Education Minister, Ruairi Quinn, at the teachers’ conferences, there is some hope that these lessons are in fact being learned.

Quinn courageously addressed the demands of the vested interests and said plainly “don’t ask for more resources”. The country is broke – historically.

Nyberg is being careful not to repeat the impossibly foolish remark of Brian Lenihan prior to the General Election. Lenihan asserted that “we all partied”.

Frankly, you don’t get more skint than that.

The EU/IMF are not an occupation force; they are not an enemy one can raise an army to fight unless one is consumed by a burning ambition to return to the economic conditions of the 19th Century.

In saying in his report that we are all to blame for the banking crisis Nyberg is being careful not to repeat the impossibly foolish remark of Brian Lenihan prior to the General Election. Lenihan asserted that “we all partied”.

Nyberg is simply saying that if the decision makers didn’t know our banking structure was weak and foolish, they had the means to find out.

They didn’t and that’s a problem that a generation of Irish people will have to confront in the future.
ECONOMY

Unemployment is real cost of weak growth

By Loraine Mulligan

FOLLOWING the recent downgrade by the International Monetary Fund of Ireland’s growth rate for 2011 to 0.5%, the Department of Finance has followed a similar course by reducing the forecast from 1.7% to 0.8%.

Furthermore, the debt to GDP ratio is expected to reach 113% in 2011 as against the earlier prediction of 99% peaking in 2013 at 118% before returning to 111% in 2015.

The weak economic outlook reflects subdued consumer spending and a continuing lack of confidence among investors, while the country’s onerous debt position results from the on-going banking crisis and borrowing requirements.

The human consequence can be most starkly seen in the forecast employment situation.

It is anticipated that the unemployment rate will rise to 14.4% in 2011, from 13.6% in 2010, before reverting to 13.7% in 2012.

What is particularly striking is that unemployment is forecast to remain as high as 12.7% in 2013, 11.5% in 2014 and 10.0% by the end of the programme period in 2015.

For those currently without jobs facing the prospect of their skills vanishing and/or emigration, the jobs dividend from recovery in the coming years is insufficient.

While it is anticipated that 100,000 jobs will be created from 2012 to 2015, the scale of the existing unemployment problem requires a radical response.

The Government’s jobs initiative must take the first step in this direction so as to provide opportunities and establish conditions for the creation of employment.

While the country’s reliance on the EU/IMF for funding presents constraints, it is essential for policy makers to make choices to prioritise human and capital investment which can generate jobs.

The revised projections also anticipate that the Government deficit will be larger than expected in 2011 at 10% of GDP, rather than 9.4%.

If the promissory notes provided to the banks are counted, the public deficit in 2010 was €66.9 billion or 32.4% of GDP.

The document states that budgetary cuts of €9.6 billion will be implemented in 2012, involving both expenditure cuts and tax increases.

This figure has not changed from that signalled under the National Recovery Plan negotiated with the EU/IMF under the last administration.

This can be explained by the fact that the timeframe for meeting the EU Stability and Growth Pact targets has been extended to 2015.

The real question is whether further revisions to the Government’s predicted growth trajectory will be required as a result of a dampening effect from the scale of additional planned austerity measures.

This suggests the richest 10% of households have a disposable income more than 10 times that of the poorest 10%.

The current fiscal, economic and banking crisis presents an opportunity to tackle existing income inequalities by ensuring the vulnerable are protected and that further recovery measures are implemented in a fair manner.

Loraine Mulligan is an economist with the SIPTU Research Department.

Irland out of step with European tax norms

The negative gap of €18.5 billion in the State’s finances (i.e. between income and expenditure) is cast into interesting light by recent figures published by Eurostat.

Government revenue in Ireland, at 34.6% of GDP is significantly behind the yield in other European countries such as Italy (46%), the Netherlands (45.9%), Austria (48.3%), the UK (40.6%) and France (40.2%).

Nordic countries traditionally associated with a strong social model such as Sweden and Finland generate government revenues of more than 50% of GDP.

It is important that taxation policies should support economic activity as well as social objectives.

Policy makers should therefore seek to learn lessons from countries that are successful in combining these goals.

A comparison of the profile of taxes in various EU member states would assist in the design and introduction of a more sustainable tax base which supports both societal and economic needs.

In this context, it is disappointing to note that Ireland exhibits a gap of 4.3 between the disposable income of those in the top 20% income bracket as compared to the 20% of individuals with the lowest level of resources, notwithstanding some narrowing during the height of the economic boom (EU Survey of Income and Living Conditions 2009).

Congress General Secretary David Begg has said that the EU and European Central Bank are “not without responsibility” for the current crisis in Ireland.

Addressing delegates at the Public Service Executive Union conference in Galway in mid-April, David Begg said Congress had informed the IMF/EU/ECB troika at a recent meeting that “there are limits to the political acceptability of austerity and these limits are close to being exceeded.”

Speaking to delegates on the role of the ECB, Begg said: “I make this point because the people from the EU and the ECB who are dictating the terms of our existence are not without responsibility [for the crisis], nor are they disinterested actors in determining who bears the burden of austerity.

“Be in no doubt that their primary objective is the protection of Europe’s banking system.”

Begg said French and German banks had an exposure of some €900 billion to ‘peripheral’ economies like Ireland. He pointed out that bond-holder exposure to Irish banks had declined while ECB emergency funding had risen dramatically.

“The bond holders are getting out under covering fire provided by the ECB,” he said.

Addressing the delegates, Begg said the Croke Park deal had not been raised or discussed in the meeting between Congress and the IMF/ECB/EU on 11th April.

He stressed that the austerity programme was causing serious damage and that Ireland had to “fight for some justice”.

He added: “We cannot carry the burden of debt and austerity being laid upon us without serious damage to our quality of life and a generation lost to unemployment and emigration.”

The human consequence can be anticipated that the unemployment rate will rise to 14.4% in 2011, from 13.6% in 2010, before reverting to 13.7% in 2012.

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The current fiscal, economic and banking crisis presents an opportunity to tackle existing income inequalities by ensuring the vulnerable are protected and that further recovery measures are implemented in a fair manner.

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Targeting income inequality ... and why it hurts everyone

By Niall Crowley

CLAIMING Our Future is organising a national discussion on what steps can be taken to reduce income inequality.

The event will take place in NUI Galway on 28th May and registration is now open on www.claimingourfuture.ie.

Income inequality was identified at the first Claiming Our Future assembly in October last year as a shared concern for trade unionsists, community activists, environmental activists and others from across the full spectrum of civil society.

Even the International Monetary Fund has voiced concern over income equality.

The organisation has just published an analysis that concluded that income equality stands out as a key driver of the duration of economic ‘growth spells’.

They have found that high ‘growth spells’ were much more likely to end in countries with less equal income distributions.

In a very unequal society, economic ‘growth spells’ were much more likely to end.

In recession, austerity policies are further deepening the inequality. The CSO has highlighted how adult poverty increased from 4.2% to 5.5% and child poverty increased from 6.3% to 8.7% in 2008/2009.

The World Wealth Report also found that Ireland’s high net worth population rose by 10% to 18,100 individuals in 2009. These individuals are investable assets of $1million or more.

The rich are still getting richer and the poor are getting poorer. Claiming Our Future is holding the national discussion later this month to build on this popular support for change to add to the growing change of perspective from Government.

The debate will focus on the value base that could inform our approach to income equality.

The discussion will also focus on the issues we need to address around earned income levels, welfare payments and taxation.

Afterwards, there will be no keynote speeches, workshops, reports, motions or amendments. Instead, all participants will have an equal input into discussing the issues and exploring how we could work together to advance income equality.

Income inequality is something we do need to talk about and to take action on.

This is not just a matter of fixing the economy. It is also about fixing our society.

Income inequality causes a broad range of health and social problems.

Mental health problems, rates of imprisonment and levels of violence are greater in societies with higher levels of income inequality.

Life expectancy, educational attainment and social mobility are all lower in these societies. We cannot afford to ignore income inequality.

Workers ‘always fall guys’ of poor safety standards on the shopfloor

By Sylvester Cronin

ANTONIE reasonably acquainted with occupational safety and health (OSH) realises that risk assessment is the cornerstone of preventing work-related accidents and illnesses.

Safety representatives are particularly well informed and many shop stewards are also clued in on the subject.

There is a legal requirement on all employers in Ireland – indeed throughout the EU – to carry out risk assessments on identified work-related hazards.


This framework directive requires that risk assessments must be in writing and that consultations must take place with the workers and/or their representatives.

This provision is fairly transposed into the Irish legislation referred to – though it is poorly implemented at workplace level.

As there is a requirement to consult workers and/or their representatives, employees have a say about the conditions that affect them at work.

They have a right to see the risk-assessment, even before engaging in work that might be considered to have an unacceptable risk to either their safety or health.

Far too many workers lose their lives, limbs and health at work because employers have not carried out proper risk assessments and put the appropriate controls in place.

Workers are always the fall guys of poor OSH standards.

Stolber

The European Commission is engaged in a process called ‘Better Regulation’, which as it turns out is a euphemism for deregulation.

In this process the EU Commission set up a body, known as Stolber Group, with a majority of hard deregulationists on board.

The Stolber Group has produced recommendations for the European Commission, which include:

• Removal of the requirement to carry out written risk assessment, for certain classes of employers – mainly for micro and small enterprises. Many see this as the thin end of the wedge.

• A 20% reduction in OSH inspections, ie HSA. Already in Ireland each workplace can expect a HSA inspection on average about once in every 14.5 years. Reducing inspections by 20% would take this average to once every 17.5 years.

Costs

All costs are calculated on the basis of the so-called Standard Cost Model (SCM), which very cruelly considers the cost burden to employers of introduction / maintenance / implementation of legislation with absolutely no reference whatsoever to the accompanying benefits.

The Indecen report of 2000 shows that poor OSH standards in Ireland cost about €5.3bn or 2.5% of GNP. This is a mere fraction of what is happening throughout the EU – with the overall cost many times greater than this figure.

And this is in addition to the calamitous and deplorable human suffering and loss.

The Stolber Group process is still on-going. Trade unions throughout the EU are lobbying MEPs, including in Ireland, to preserve the integrity of the Framework Directive.

This is yet another concrete example of the absolute link between politics and working conditions and particularly the huge influence employ-er representatives have in politics and politicians.


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One year on, Connolly’s Shoes told to foot the bill

MANDATE has called on the owners of Connolly’s Shoes to pay thousands of euro owed to four striking workers after a number of awards from the Rights Commissioners.

The four have been on strike at Connolly’s Shoes’ Dun Laoghaire branch for 12 months and Mandate has issued a special e-card to mark the first anniversary of the action.

Mandate Divisional Organiser, Joe Donnelly, explained that the workers went on strike because their employer, Matt Connolly, tried to unilaterally force further pay cuts on their employees and other changes to their conditions while they were already on a shorter working week.

Joe Donnelly said that the workers have still received no compensation from Connolly’s Shoes a year after having been summarily dismissed.

“In fact, the workers recently brought a number of cases before the Rights Commissioners and, as a result, sums totalling thousands of euro were awarded in their favour for breaches of the Payment of Wages Act.

“Unfortunately, Connolly’s Shoes have refused to pay any of these awards – leaving their workers in a very tight situation financially as a result.

“In addition, they have not attended hearings with either the Labour Relations Commission or the Rights Commissioners. However, despite this, the four strikers’ spirits remain remarkably high.”

Striker Damian Keegan explained that the last year has been a hard slog for him and his three colleagues. “The four of us, collectively, gave 110 years of loyal service to Connolly’s Shoes and we had a very good relationship with management until the current owner took over.

“This is why we have been so disappointed by how we have been treated by the company over the last year.

“However, we’re determined to ensure that we get compensation for being summarily dismissed as well as the money we’re owed for the company’s breaches of Payment of Wages legislation.

“It seems very strange to us that, in this day and age, our employer can get away with ignoring the Labour Relations Commission and the Rights Commissioners and leave us ‘high and dry’ as a result.”

Damian Keegan concluded by saying that if the four strikers get the money they are owed, then they could get back to living more normal lives once again.

He also acknowledged the huge support they have received from Mandate, elected representatives and members of the public.

Explaining some of the background to the dispute, Mandate’s Joe Donnelly said: “Connolly’s Shoes staff always recognised that in the current environment it may be necessary to look at reducing costs.

“In this context, it’s a measure of their commitment to the company that in Autumn 2009, they believed that they had an agreement on working a shorter working week and hoped that the company’s owners would sit down and negotiate an ongoing agreement with them.

“However, only a few weeks later, Connolly’s Shoes insisted that the staff take a further pay cut and accept more changes to their working hours.

“The staff asked their employer to negotiate with Mandate and he refused.

“Connolly’s Shoes then asked the workers to sign an undertaking agreeing to these changes and when two refused, they were sacked without any notice.

“Two of their colleagues supported the two sacked workers and they were summarily dismissed as well.

“Joe Donnelly pointed out that nearly 10,000 people have signed a petition calling on the owners of Connolly’s Shoes to enter negotiations with their staff members or their union representatives.

“The strike was granted ‘all out strike’ status by Congress and has received incredible support from the public.

“During July 2010, hundreds of local Dun Laoghaire people, trade unionists and prominent politicians - including the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Éamon Gilmore TD - turned out in support of the workers at a public rally,” Mr Donnelly added.
CONGRESS has submitted new proposals to Government that call for an overhaul of the national skills and training system. Investment in key infrastructural projects to deliver competitive benefits and the harnessing of the expertise of the semi-state sector to aid job creation and growth.

The proposals were submitted ahead of the Government’s planned Jobs Initiative.

In a letter to Taoiseach Enda Kenny, Congress General Secretary David Begg said: “Growth in domestic demand is essential to job creation. To get growth we need investment and therefore our proposals are now more urgent and relevant than ever.”

The proposals envisage a complete overhaul of the skills and training system. With the creation of a new training agency that would focus on work-based training and identify where future skills deficits might emerge.

It would also see the creation of a new fund to finance upskilling of the workforce as “one of the surest forms of insurance against unemployment”. This would be done by diverting a portion of the existing National Training Fund to individual and collective upskilling.

The skills proposals are contained in a new Congress report on the system, ‘A New Skills Policy for a New Economy’.

The Congress job creation proposals submitted to Government also envisage harnessing the expertise and resources of the semi-states in the delivery of “labour intensive infrastructural projects”.

According to David Begg, this would be “the best way of getting early results on employment”, particularly as semi-state companies have the capacity to finance many projects themselves.

These companies already have financial strength, management capacity, geographic spread, administrative infrastructure and the procurement capability to move quickly,” David Begg added.

The Congress proposals envisage semi-state involvement in “big ticket” projects such as a national water and waste system and delivery of a next generation broadband system.

Congress has also urged the usage of labour and social clauses in all public contracts, with the specific aim of maximising the “employment and skills impact” of such projects.

Labour and social clauses set specific targets for local employment, the provision of training or the purchase of goods from local suppliers.

The clauses are being used increasingly across the EU to ensure a better “social return” from public monies and spend on infrastructure projects.

There was a special focus on Sean Ó’Casey at the Larkin Hedge School which took place in Dublin from 5th to 7th May. Above, John Shannan of the Dubliners and Ciarán Ó’Rialla before a portrait of the famous playwright in Liberty Hall Picture: Tommy Clancy

FIDDLERS BOW TO THE MASTER
MEMBERS IN FURTHER EDUCATION
The scheme will offer up to ten awards each year.

SECOND-LEVEL AWARDS FOR MEMBERS AND FOR MEMBERS’ CHILDREN
Up to thirty awards will be made each year to second-level students to cover the senior cycle (the two years up to the Leaving Certificate).

GAELTACHT AWARDS FOR MEMBERS’ CHILDREN
Up to twenty-five awards will be made each year for the children of members to cover the cost of their participation (accommodation and tuition fees) in a Gaeltacht course under the scheme operated jointly by SIPTU and Gael Linn.

A member, applying on his/her own behalf or on behalf of his/her child/children, must have at least one year’s membership of the Union and be in benefit when both the application and the payments are made.

Application forms and further information available from your Sector Organiser.

Closing date for receipt of completed applications is 30th September, 2011 (for awards 2011/2012).

NEW information has emerged concerning the profiting by religious orders from the forced labour of Magdalene Laundry inmates.

Magdalene Survivors Together, a campaign group seeking justice for the women and children who were incarcerated in the religious order run institutions, has recently received a list which seems to outline payments from companies for work carried out by laundry inmates.

Filmmaker Ger Boland, who has made a documentary ‘The Forgotten Maggies’, on the plight of Magdalene Laundry survivors, said; “We received a copy book in the post, it is unclear from whom, which lists names of companies that gave money to a Magdalene Laundry over a six-month period in the 1980s. “It would seem to be the first piece of hard evidence that these institutions were making a lot of money. We worked out that according to the information in the book they were making €900 on average a week.

“On top of this they were getting funded by the State and weren’t even paying the workers.”

Children and young women incarcerated in the Magdalene Laundries were meant to receive education there.

However, in the documentary – which Boland co-produced with Steven O’Riordan – survivors explain that these commercial entities provided little or no education, acting instead as sweatshops and a source of cheap labour, where those who didn’t comply were “sent to a mental hospital.”

The new revelations are increasing the pressure on the Government to issue a full apology to the Magdalene Laundry survivors and compensate them for the years of forced labour and abuse.

In April, another campaign group – Justice for Magdalenes – submitted a report to the UN Commission Against Torture stating that survivors continue to suffer due to the Government’s failure to apologise, investigate and compensate them.

The 47-page submission, which includes personal testimonies from Magdalene survivors, points towards Ireland’s legal duties under the convention against torture to investigate allegations of torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment and to ensure redress for victims.

Lawyer Maeve O’Rourke, the submission’s author, told the Irish Times that the UN process ‘offers Ireland a chance to show the world that it is serious about putting right the mistakes of its past and ensuring a better and more equal future for all, including those who were so unjustly treated by the State in decades gone by’.

The UN Commission’s judgment on the submission is awaited as is a Government decision on a report cataloguing similar abuse in these institutions presented by the Irish Human Rights Commission last year.

‘The Forgotten Maggies’ highlights how the shame of people admitting they had been part of the Magdalene Laundry system has aided the cover-up of their abuse and forced labour.

One woman explains how she had been married 38 years but never confided in her husband about her past experience in the laundries.

Maureen Sullivan – a key source for the documentary after she became the first person to receive compensation from the State for abuse relating to the laundries – said she never confided with loved ones about what had happened.

“You just didn’t say it to anyone. You thought that you should never tell anyone that you were part of the laundries,” she added.
Susan O’Keeffe is a journalist and newly elected Senator for the Labour Party

A moral imperative to put our children first

The story of a young boy being bullied and killing himself haunts me. The fact that the story of his death was the subject of a fictional play performed by teenagers at the recent Feis Ceol in Sligo is irrelevant. The fears and traumas of our young people are played out for real every day at schools and in homes across the country.

Self harm and suicide are on the rise. Depression, among the very young is now a growing phenomenon. Currently there are 30 beds available for young people with mental health illness in the country and best guidelines suggest a minimum of 100 are required.

We are still admitting children and teenagers into adult care facilities which do not have properly qualified staff, but there is no alternative. And then there is the waiting list where more than 2,500 children and teenagers wait for psychiatric care with some already having waited more than nine months.

The Mental Health Commission is optimistic that improvements are forthcoming but we know that mental health is the poorest relation in our health system and it is poorest of all for those with the greatest need – our children. To all intents and purposes, they are at the bottom of the heap.

It is not just the health services which have failed children. Schools are not properly equipped to cope with children with emotional behavioural disorders. Resource teachers are allocated to schools based on numbers – not on need. And resource hours are never enough and in even shorter supply in schools without access to private psychological or clinical assessments.

The promised Children’s Referendum cannot come soon enough. It will not answer all the problems but it will, for the first time, make our children visible and begin to define our responsibilities towards them.

We are nothing without our children and our neglect of them impoverishes us. Literacy rates falling and suicide rates rising are the crisis we dare not mention which will never qualify for an international bailout.

This responsibility is ours alone and the moral imperative to step up and put children front and centre in our society is obvious. Yet we are moving in slow motion and with much distraction.

We can and will look bankers, queens, investors and entrepreneurs in the eye and tell them to come and do business with Ireland. Yet we are not so quick to make a pledge to our children that we will hold their hand and make Ireland a better place for them in which to live!

How we educate our children and how we invest in their emotional wellbeing tells the world who we are and what kind of society we value. Right now, our score is poor! We need to ensure that, at least, policies in housing, health and education start by being centred on children’s needs.

By embracing our children and putting them first, we will think and act differently. We will have a new imperative which, in turn, will generate a new energy and a fresh focus and which can only benefit all of us in a novel ‘trickle-up’ approach to rebuilding our society.
Saturday: The holiday snaps look great. The fact that I was tanning my backside while the rest of them were wading through the results of the banking stress tests made the vacation all the sweeter. My stress test results were brilliant...and no wonder.

Chris Donoghue on Newstalk tried to give me a rough ride but I was having none of it. As I told him, everyone knows where I stand. I wrote a book on the subject. I got a bit carried away and told it made no difference if I was there or not. Thank God no one in the media picked that up – it might catch on.

The cheeky git told me that as a journalist the Queen had messed up his holidays and that holiday plans can be changed. Blimey, what does he think I am? A worker? Anyway did they really think I was going to sit through a Dáil debate with contributions from people who know a lot less than I do? Not bloody likely.

Sunday: It is great to work for an understanding boss. My weekly rant gives me a great platform to vent my spleen. What I like about Anguish is his loyalty. None of that auld objectivity and impartiality from Mr F or She Who He Must Be Obeyed. My chosen one for the Seanad has been given a generous spread. The Tony award for brass neck goes to Williams who has managed with my help to re-invent himself as a fully-fledged independent voice and the Sindos is giving him great coverage – without mentioning his PD past. Some things are too painful to keep mentioning.

I do not know why they give Coleman such a plug every week but I told Williams not to worry. He is my favourite right winger but I do love Sean Barrett and Marc Coleman just not as much as Tony.

John Crown took a seat on the NUI panel. That was a great stunt he pulled off. agreeing to give up his Seanad salary. He can well afford it...consultants are nearly as well paid as stock brokers and hedge fund managers. Anguish loves him too. What with me and Willie O’Dea we could set up our own independent party. And we could put Celia Larkin on our front bench just like Mickey Martin did with Sheehan’s wife.

Monday: He still my beating heart. News has come through that a bearded tyrant who has been wreaking havoc has been captured. Which one of the bearded brethren has finally been hunted down?

Damn, it’s not them at all. It’s only Bin Laden. And I thought all my May Days had come together.

Tuesday: Dirty tricks. They are trying to dish the dirt on me. Shattered. That’s what I am. No one passed any remarks on Alan during the election campaign but all of a sudden the phone is hopping off the hook. They dug up quotes from when I praised Fingers for his stewardship of INBS. ‘Fingleton, for all his faults, has delivered the only thing that matters in business: profit,” I wrote in 2003. How was I to know – and any way we all love him in Sindo Towers. It would just not have been cricket to probe too deeply. Circulating the clippings now was a low blow by a political opponent.

Wednesday: It gets worse. They are now touting the article that I wrote about Seanie Fitzpatrick. When yer man Richard Burroughs was appointed chairman of Bank of Ireland I suggested Fitzpatrick was the one for the big job but commented in my inimical style that he would be “far too dynamic for the role.” It is coming back to haunt me and Baldy Noonan even accused me of touting Fitzpatrick for the board of the Central Bank.

Thursday: These ads are appearing in the newspaper inviting the great unwashed to apply for State board. Kenny says it is to make it all more transparent but I do not trust him. I do not trust Kenny and Gilmore. Apparently if they do not get enough suitable applicants the Minister can invite applications. Enda had the cheek to point out that I had suggested names to him already. I thought I had done that off the record and could not believe it when he came out with it on the floor of the house.

Friday: Just been pouring over the Seanad results. Sean Barrett took my seat, the one I had promised to Williams. Nice to see another right winger in there but Williams is so disappointed. Still, if Norris gets elected to the Park there will be a by-election and I will make sure that my favourite lawyer is poised to take his place. He can stand on an anti-cronyism ticket.

Liberty Quiz

*Answer the six questions correctly and you can win a weekend away for two in one of Ireland’s Fair Hotels.

1. In labour law what does ERO stand for?
2. Which Labour TD has raised the issue of agencies breaching the employment laws in the South West?
3. What is the name of the home town of Cuban revolutionary Victor Drekke?
4. Which former US president has voiced his support for the political prisoners known as the Miami 5 currently held in US jails?
5. How much would be raised annually for investment in jobs if the government adopted the tiered levy on incomes above €100,000 proposed by SIPTU General President Jack O’Connor?
6. In what year did Jim Larkin begin organising workers in Belfast?

*Terms and conditions apply.
Greencore sell-off left a bitter taste... not to be repeated

By Martin Ferris

WE DO not need a crystal ball nor do we need to engage in theoretical economics to discover the impact of privatizing state assets for public services and workers.

We already have the example of what happened to Greencore.

Greencore is the private company that replaced the state-owned Irish sugar company when it was privatised in 1991. At that time the Carlow and Mallow plants employed up to 1,000 people.

The factories also provided an important part of the incomes for beet growers and were central to the economic and social lives of the two towns.

Carlow was closed in 2005 because Greencore, and the then Minister for Agriculture Mary Coughlan, claimed that it would not be viable to keep it in operation due to EU reform of the sugar sector.

Assurances, however, were given that Mallow would remain open and it seemed to have a promising future as a modern plant employing the most up-to-date processing technology.

Greencore decided to close Mallow in 2006, again citing the EU as the reason. The company was again supported in this decision by Mary Coughlan.

A report by the European Court of Auditors later last year, however, made it clear that Mallow could have been kept open as a viable plant even under the new sugar regime.

Indeed at the time the reform was discussed, Irish negotiators surrendered our 200,000 tonnes of quota while France increased its quota by 350,000 tonnes.

It is also worthy of note that at the time of the closures Greencore emphatically rejected proposals outlining how the plants could be kept open for the production of bioethanol from sugar beet.

Why then did Greencore decide to close? The answer – as with many other things in this state – lies in property.

Soon after the Carlow factory closed Greencore, ostensibly a food company, announced a €1.1 billion plan to build on the site.

Deirdre Desmond, a chap not normally associated with the real economy, sold his 22% of Greencore in July 2006 and this was snapped up by Liam Carroll of Zoe Developments, which is now mired in NAMA.

Carroll later expanded his share of Greencore sell-off as a single entity. There is no clear argument, as a means of substantially reducing its debt exposure,” while “privatisation of the airports should be considered.

The State’s 25% shares in Aer Lingus should be disposed of as soon as is opportune. It argues that CIE’s tours business, Rossclare port, Expressway and other bus businesses competing directly with private operators should be disposed of.

The National Stud and race courses controlled by Horse Racing Ireland should be disposed of, while Bord na gCon should sell its greyhound tracks and tote interest if commercially satisfactory terms become available, the report states.

Review Group claims sale of state assets ‘inevitable’

By Frank Connolly

THE report of the Review Group on State Assets and Liabilities published last month raises the prospect of a fire sale of some of the country’s most important and strategic semi-state companies.

Some of these semi-states, includ- ing the ESB and Bord Gáis Eireann, have been built up over many decades and have become hugely successful companies that also control strategically vital state infra-structure.

Bord Na Mona, Coillte, Aer Lingus, the Irish Aviation Authority, CIE, RTE and TG4, the National Stud, Bord na gCon, Horse Racing Ireland, as well as air and sea ports are among the semi-state companies earmarked for break up or at least partial disposal.

While the report does not recom- mend when and how these state assets might be disposed of – and indeed underlines that they should only be sold on ‘a planned, phased basis to maximise value to the state’ – it also describes ‘asset disposal as inevitable’.

It recommends that the ESB’s transmission grid, including the high-voltage system in Northern Ireland, should be transferred to Eirgrid and retained in public ownership as a regulated monopoly.

It states that the ESB should be required to dispose of further generating capacity in Ireland and that its energy supply business, electricity distribution business, generation assets, international investment and consulting and engineering busi-nesses should be sold as a single entity. There is no clear argument, other than the State’s need for cash, to justify the break up and disposal of a semi-state that has been at the heart of Irish economic and industri- al development since the 1920s, as well as improving and guaranteeing the supply of electricity to every home and workplace in Ireland.

The report recommends the disposal of Bord Na Móna, including peat extraction rights, but not the ownership of the country’s peat lands.

Similarly, with Collie it recom- mends the disposal of forest and non-forest assets but not its forest land.

It states that the Dublin Airport Authority ‘should dispose of its non-core assets, primarily overseas, as a review of its entire business model is undertaken’.

In the report it states that the sale of state assets should be as ‘early as is viable in the context of the budgetary framework’ and that the proceeds of the sales should be used to repay the National Pensions Reserve Fund.

The report concludes that the ESB, Eirgrid, Bord na Móna, Aer Lingus, Coillte and the Irish Aviation Authority ‘should dispose of these assets, unless they are required to finance future expenditure on investment in their existing businesses’.

It recommends that these semi-states should sell state assets ‘if the proceeds are likely to be sufficient to refinance any debt liabilities which may arise from the sale of any of these assets’.

By Martin Ferris

The Irish Farmers Association also took a court action on behalf of the growers.

Coughlan continued to defend the share out even though Greencore had failed to submit a proper restructuring plan to the EU.

Clearly the only restructuring they had in mind was to use the former sites for property.

What happened in Greencore is a good case study for what might happen if the Irish state moves to priva-tise other state companies.

The lessons from Greencore would suggest that this would spell disaster for those employed in state compa- nies, and indeed for the services and resources over which they have con- trol.

Martin Ferris is Sinn Féin TD for Kerry North
Election of SIPTU General President and Vice President

Dear Colleagues,

The term of office of the General President and Vice President is due to expire in May of next year and in the event of a contest, an election would normally be held at the next National Biennial Delegate Conference or at a Special Delegate Conference. The candidates elected would be required to commence their term of office within six months of the election.

In line with the Union’s commitment to direct maximum resources and effort into organising workers and building Union density and to facilitate the avoidance of a Special Delegate Conference early next year whose sole purpose would be to elect General Officers, the General President and Vice President have decided to vacate their office on the 24th January 2012 to enable an election for General President and Vice President to take place at the Biennial Delegate Conference in October of this year.

At its meeting on Friday the 15th April 2011, the National Executive Council noted the decision by the General President and Vice President and agreed the process and regulations of inviting Sector Committees to nominate joint candidatures for the positions of General President and Vice President whose term of office would commence on the 25th January 2012.

Consequently, Sector Committees are invited to nominate joint candidates for the position of General President and Vice President.

1. A nomination of joint candidates i.e. one candidate for the position of General President and one candidate for the position of Vice President, must be made by a resolution of a Sector Committee meeting the notice of which must include this matter on the Agenda for the meeting.

2. Nominations must be notified to the General Secretary’s office, on the prescribed nomination form, no later than 4.30p.m. on Friday 29th July 2011.

In the event of a contest, an election shall take place at the Biennial Delegate Conference in October of this year. The election would be conducted on the principle of proportional representation, each Delegate to the Conference having a single transferable vote.

Yours sincerely,

Joe O’Flynn
General Secretary

EU Competitiveness Pact will drive wages down

The EU Competitiveness Pact seeks to give the EU Commission power over the wage bargaining process in individual member states. Its expressed intention is to “depress wages” by enacting into EU law a process whereby the lower wages of a ‘competitor’ state would set a benchmark for the pay levels of neighbouring countries. The Pact also seeks to weaken central bargaining processes and convert cuts in public sector wages into private sector pay reductions. The central aim is to create a downward spiral in wages throughout the Eurozone and the seven other EU states that have signed up to it.

This policy to replace currency devaluation with wage devaluation as a way out of the economic crisis takes no account of individual or national debt levels or of variations in the cost of living in different states.

Strategic State Assets should be used to create jobs

There is a certain irony in a situation where a Government has to contemplate selling off state assets at bargain basement prices while simultaneously borrowing billions to pour into useless banking institutions. The real value of state assets is not their price but in the strategic role they can play, and have played, in the development of our economy.

Apart from the disastrous decision by the previous government to grant an open ended credit guarantee to the banks in September 2008 (without even knowing the true scale of their debt) the prior sale of the majority State holding in Eircom by an earlier Fianna Fáil led administration must rank not far behind in terms of stupidity and shortsightedness.

The effect of that decision was to squander the potential of exploiting the communications and broadband revolution which we were equipped to do with one of the best capitalised and technologically advanced telecom companies in Europe.

It would be a further disaster if there were to be further disposals and break-ups of strategic state assets dictated by the State’s urgent need for cash.
By Kieran O’Brien

A FORMER commander in the Cuban Revolutionary Armed Forces – and a Bay of Pigs veteran – was guest of honour at special event held in Liberty Hall last month to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the infamous CIA-led invasion.

Victor Dreke commanded two companies of the 117th Battalion in the action and was later wounded during the fighting.

Dr Jack McGinley, of Trinity College Dublin and Chair of the SIPTU Solidarity with Cuba Forum, opened the 16th April symposium.

The symposium began with the documentary ‘66 Hours’ which included archive footage of the short but intensive campaign.

Cuban leader Fidel Castro is shown travelling throughout the region organising resistance in the hours following the attack. His efforts led to the first military defeat suffered by the US in the Caribbean.

US forces consisted of 1,400 armed Cuban exiles backed by the CIA and overseen by President John F Kennedy’s administration.

However, the sheer moral superiority of the Cuban revolutionary forces combined with detailed preparation by Castro, Che Guevara and Victor Dreke, among others, ensured the invaders were routed and sent fleeing towards the swamps within days of arrival.

An interesting discussion concerning the validity of the socialist revolution took place with leading Cuban journalist and broadcaster Reinaldo Taladrid.

This touched on the great advances made in healthcare and education within Cuba since the 1959 revolution – despite the draconian US trade blockade.

The symposium also looked at the challenge faced by Cuba on the economic front after the sudden withdrawal of Soviet aid in the mid 1990s – and its response in developing alternative revenue streams.

Cuba has achieved considerable success in the fields of science and technology and leads the world in cures for meningitis and other serious ailments. In tourism, its beach resort complexes in Varadero and others around the country ensure a revenue flow to central government from approximately 60 individual complexes.

The US boycott was discussed in some detail at the conference. Dr David Hickey highlighted its impact from a human rights standpoint and noted its effect in limiting vital medical supplies reaching the island.

The conference also heard how former US President Jimmy Carter, who visited Cuba recently, had voiced his support for the Miami Five – five Cuban nationals currently imprisoned in the US.

He said: ‘The original trial of the Cuban Five was very doubtful – it violated standards. My hope is that the President might grant a pardon.’

The symposium concluded with the adoption of the Final Declaration condemning the blockade, the continued imprisonment of the Miami Five and other resolutions.

In a closing speech, SIPTU President, Jack O’Connor, speaking in his role as Congress President, contrasted Cuba’s ability to survive economically with the recent financial collapse of some so-called developed countries.

He also flagged up Cuba’s enormous contribution to the struggles for liberation of ‘oppressed peoples across the globe’ and described it as a ‘beacon of light’.

O’Connor noted that an independent Cuba did not present a military threat to the US but rather threatened the current neo-liberal economic consensus with an alternative vision.

He told the audience: ‘Every day that Cuba survives is another day in which the possibility of an alternative social and economic system based on the principles of social solidarity presents a threat to those who benefit by an economic system driven by the imperative of greed.’

He added that Cuba’s continued independence represented an alternative to ‘the dictatorship of the market’.

After the symposium, a wreath was laid by Victor Dreke at the James Connolly memorial in the presence of the Cuban ambassador to Ireland, Teresaq Trujillo, Jack O’Connor, Maria Aleida del Riego of the Cuban Institute for Friendship Among Peoples, and Unite General Secretary, Jimmy Kelly.
Bay of Pigs veteran brings history to Dublin

By Scott Millar

It’s not every day that you meet a man who was not only present at some of the greatest events of the 20th century but helped make them happen. But in the bar of Liberty Hall sitting across from Commander Victor Dreke, I find myself face to face with such a man. However, Dreke is not a believer in the great men interpretation of history. “I think that men exist in the world but are created by the varied conditions that surround them.”

Referring to the conditions that led him, from the age of 15, to involvement in militant union activity and to eventually join the guerrillas led by Fidel Castro and Che Guevara fighting against a corrupt dictatorship, Dreke says; “We were not born like that. North American imperialism is what made us what we are and if the imperialists continue to pressure our populations and kill leaders of unions – or whatever sector – people are going to rise up and leadership will come out of it. It is the situation which creates a revolutionary.”

Dreke outlines the conditions that turned him into a revolutionary. He was brought up in the town of Sagua la Grande, a centre of the sugar producing industry and a busy port which had a strong tradition of militancy dating back to the Cuban struggle for independence from Spain. “I was poor and studied but because I was black and the discrimination which existed before the revolution, we also had to work to provide for our families – that is what turned us into union men.”

The future military commander points to two key dates in his radicalisation – firstly when trade union protests engulfed his home town in 1952 in the aftermath of dictator Fulgencio Batista taking power and again in 1958.

“I recall the famous strike of the 9th April 1958 when the workers took over Sagua la Grande for 48 hours armed only with sticks, stones, machetes and only a couple of revolvers. The police came and assassinated many of the leaders of this strike.”

When the revolutionary forces were victorious in 1959, Dreke says it brought not only economic liberty to the Cuban people but also helped end the racial discrimination fostered by earlier regimes.

Dreke described how he travelled to Africa in the early 1960s with Che Guevara where they helped train guerrilla movements in the Congo and Guinea Bissau. He also recalled how the Cuban revolution had assisted national liberation movements in Syria, Algeria and Vietnam where their engineers played a vital role in constructing the famous Ho Chi Minh trail.

The election of a black president of the United States has not revolutionised the relationship between his state and Cuba, but it’s not something which Dreke holds personally against Barack Obama.

“The people who actually run the US are the people who construct the weapons, they call the shots. Obama doesn’t call the shots. It doesn’t matter if they are a Republican or Democrat president, it’s the arms producing mafia who are in control.”

He adds; “Personally I think Obama was a new thing that they [the arms producing mafia] looked for. An intelligent man, black skinned so he was the man who could sort out the problems they had for the moment. I don’t think of Obama as white or black – he is a capitalist defending his system.”

But he has no fear about those defending the socialist system in Cuba. Dreke concludes that “in 50 years’ time, for the 100th anniversary of the Bay of Pigs, I will not be here but my grandchil- dren will be and they will be living in a socialist Cuba.”
Ó Snodaigh warns of flood of water poverty

RESPONDING to reports that a flat rate charge for water is to be introduced by the Government, Sinn Féin’s Aengus Ó Snodaigh TD – who is spokesperson for the No Water Charges Campaign – said that families cannot afford a further domestic bill and predicted water poverty will be the next social crisis.

Mr Ó Snodaigh said: “Domestic water charges were abolished in 1999 for a good reason. A flat rate charge for water is simply a tax by a different name. It is regressive in the extreme. It serves no environmental purpose and it will be resisted as it was in the early 90s. Both Government parties were elected on a promise that they would not introduce a flat charge for water. Both parties said that a flat rate charge would be unfair. Not only is it unfair, it is also unaffordable. The fact that 150,000 households are behind on their ESB bills is evidence that families simply cannot afford another utility bill.

‘If water charges are introduced the ‘energy poor’ will shortly be ‘water poor’ as well. It is our duty in government to deal with the immediate difficulties these measures are most necessary to address. Intra-household difficulties face in terms of not losing the roof over the heads other measures are required as well.’

In order to put a more long-term solution in place, I envisage the following assessment process taking place – those able to meet two-thirds of the interest payments on their mortgage will be eligible for a further three-year moratorium on the repossession of their home as recommend by the Expert Group. Homeowners unable to reconfigure their mortgage payments will receive a public subsidy to the same value as the rent supplement they would have received had they rented a home appropriate to their needs on the private market. In this case, where the rent supplement is sufficient to cover both the capital and interest portions of the mortgage servicing costs, the State will gain an equity stake in the dwelling which reflects its contribution to the full mortgage costs over the lifetime of the loan.

“Every family in Ireland has seen a huge drop in their household income because of how FF bankrupted our country. It is our duty in government to ensure while we work to get our country back on its feet that homeowners are not left behind on the side of the street.”

Hard pressed homeowners need support

Speaking in response to a Private Member’s Motion on residential mortgage debt, Labour TD Ciarán Lynch said: “In response to people’s immediate and pressing needs, we are going to: Put in place a two-year moratorium on repossessions.

Convert MABS into a strengthened Personal Debt Management Agency and this agency will be set up within a comprehensive legislative framework.

Make greater use of the Mortgage Interest Supplement Payment.

However, while I believe that these measures are most necessary to deal with the immediate difficulties people face in terms of not losing the roof over the heads other measures are required as well.”

Probed recruitment agencies

DURING a curious exchange in the Dáil on Tuesday (3rd May) on the subject of appointments to State boards, Taoiseach Enda Kenny referred to having received suggestions from Deputy Shane Ross of possible nominees for some of these eagerly sought positions.

The exchange went as follows:

An Taoiseach: If an advertisement appears for a position, a number of people express an interest in it and the Minister and the Cabinet find that the range of competencies or experience is not available, they are entitled to move away from the list of those who expressed an interest. Such nominees have to be nominated by the Minister and approved by the Cabinet after going through the process of appearing before an Oireachtas committee.

Shane Ross: Curious Dáil exchange

Deputy Shane Ross: Could they nominate one of their friends?

An Taoiseach: That could happen in much the same way as the Deputy said to me when he told me he had a couple of nominees for positions whom he said I might consider.

Deputy Phil Hogan: They could be the Deputy’s friends also.

Deputy Shane Ross: I will give the Taoiseach their names again if he likes.

An Taoiseach: I do not know whether they are the Deputy’s friends.

On the same day in the house finance minister, Michael Noonan, said that he “did not want to remind the Deputy (Ross) of what he wrote in 2004 and 2005”.

“Was Deputy Ross not the man who was promoting the candidacy of Sean FitzPatrick for the board of the Central Bank?” Noonan asked.

What Liberty would like to know is which people did Deputy Ross wish to have appointed to which boards and on what grounds?

The correct answer could win a weekend for two in a Fair Hotel. No conflicts of interest allowed.
MAKE no mistake about it ‘Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera’, currently on show at the Irish Museum of Modern Art, is a superb exhibition and anyone remotely interested in art, life or politics should get themselves up to Kilmainham and view the work on display.

On a personal level I have to admit that I was discomfited by some coverage of the exhibition. Several commentators seemed to take undue pleasure in recording the view that the exhibition, once and for all, proved that Kahlo is a far superior artist to Rivera. For a start, I find such comparative analysis simply idiotic. Art is not an Olympic sport where inevitably someone must come first.

Also, I feel that such formulations of opinion have more to do with a distorted notion of feminism than any objective artistic assessment. The early days of the Soviet Union would be another rare example, when the Soviet authorities encouraged the radical work of the Russian constructivists. Of course, at first, my only opportunity to appreciate the work of Rivera came through the study of reproduction of his powerful murals. However, many years ago, on a visit to the San Francisco Art Institute I came upon a wonderful mural ‘The Making of a Fresco Showing the Building of a City’ which depicted a mural with the central section featuring a giant portrayal of a building worker being painted by a team of artists. Rivera shows himself with his back to the spectator not as an inspired genius but as a labourer on the same level as the “painted” workmen building the city.

On the same trip I visited the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and saw ‘Frida and Diego’ and was blown away by this small, intense, highly charged double portrait by Rivera’s wife Frida Kahlo. I was immediately impelled to discover more about this powerful but tiny woman who, at that stage, was unfairly eclipsed by Rivera’s giant reputational shadow. It is not for nothing that their nickname as a couple was “the elephant and the dove”.

The more I learnt about Frida Kahlo and her work, the more I realised that she was not only a truly remarkable character but also an exceptional artist. Most of her pictures are portraits of herself, depicting, in a highly personal manner, her life, her politics and, above all, her suffering. She explained: “I paint myself because I am so often alone.”

I believe we are most fortunate here in Ireland to be given the opportunity to view some of the best of these wonderful self-portraits in the exhibition in IMMA. Unfortunately, however, if you want to see the best work of Diego Rivera, which is unquestionably represented by his exuberant mural work, I suggest that you get yourself a plane ticket to Mexico City, go to the National Palace and marvel at ‘The History of Mexico: From the Conquest to the Future’. MAKE no mistake about it 'Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera', currently on show at the Irish Museum of Modern Art, is a superb exhibition and anyone remotely interested in art, life or politics should get themselves up to Kilmainham and view the work on display.

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The Fair Hotels campaign of union members supporting good employers is a blueprint for building a sustainable economic recovery, SIPTU General President, Jack O’Connor, said at the first national Fair Hotels Expo on Wednesday (13th April).

Addressing the event in Liberty Hall, where 29 hotels hosted stalls, Jack O’Connor said that initiatives such as the Fair Hotels campaign were in the interest of both the island’s 800,000 trade union members and well run businesses.

Fair Hotels is an initiative of hotel workers employed in Fair Hotels throughout Ireland and their trade union representatives. Hotels are invited to participate in the Fair Hotels campaign by their own staff and commit to the objective to support and promote quality employment in the hotel industry in Ireland. The hotel is then promoted to union members worldwide at the www.fairhotels.ie website.

O’Connor said; “It is about ensuring the euros and cents of union members are used as far as possible to support the good employment of union members in our economy.”

From this year, all ICTU affiliated unions have stated that they will hold their conferences in Fair Hotels, with those with long standing contracts with hotels outside of the campaign committed to ceasing them as soon as legally possible.

Since it started in May 2010, 47 hotels have signed up to the campaign. Among them is Bloomfield House Hotel, Mullingar, whose Sales and Marketing manager Oliver Gaffey was among those attending the Expo.

“We have been involved in the Fair Hotels campaign since the beginning and we have certainly seen many inquiries and new business from the initiative. Events like the Expo and other awareness raising initiatives are assisting the message of the campaign to get out there,” Oliver Gaffey said.

ICTU general secretary David Begg told the trade unionists and hoteliers gathered in Liberty Hall that the campaign’s message had been taken to union members throughout Europe, with meetings in recent weeks with Scottish and German union leaders who have agreed to promote the use of Fair Hotels to their members visiting Ireland. In the coming weeks Welsh and Dutch unions will also be briefed on how they can support the campaign.

David Begg said the approach benefited both workers and business: “You can’t have good employment without a successful profitable business and you can’t have that without good employment practices.”
The Clayton Hotel Galway is the latest in a series of hotels to sign up to the Fair Hotels initiative. Speaking at the Fair Hotels Expo held in Liberty Hall, SIPTU Sector Organiser Pat Ward welcomed the Clayton Hotel as a valuable addition to the campaign for unions and their members and went on to declare Galway open for Union Conference business.

“By signing up to the Fair Hotels initiative the Clayton Hotel has committed to the principle of their employees right to join and to be collectively represented by SIPTU,” Pat Ward said. “Over the coming weeks a series of meetings with the Clayton Hotel workers have been scheduled in order to assist in making them aware of the benefits of being organised and showing that by acting collectively they can in a meaningful way deal with issues at a local level which will no doubt positively influence the decision making process in the hotel,” he said.

Located only minutes from Galway City Centre and Galway Airport, the four star Clayton Hotel features 195 bedrooms boasting large conference facilities and spacious luxury accommodation, 12 dedicated meeting rooms, a spacious and versatile ballroom and a leisure centre.

Tribes Restaurant serves the finest of Galway cuisine or you can relax in The Enclosure Bar & Bistro where you can enjoy a delectable and varied bar menu.

Thinking of holidaying in Ireland?
www.fairhotels.ie

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Voucher is for B&B only and does not include any other meals.
This offer will only be accepted at booking stage by quoting “FAMWV069”. Otherwise full accommodation rates will be charged on check-out.
Voucher can not be used on any other themed weekends.
Plaque unveiled to honour fallen Belfast Brigadista

Some 75 years after the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, a special plaque honouring International Brigade volunteer William Tomlinson was unveiled in his native Belfast last month.

Members of the local community, community activists, veterans’ relatives and SIPTU activists attended the event – organised by Teach na Fálte, Lower Castlecairn Community Group and Charter NI – on 16th April.

At the unveiling, pictured above, local historian John Quinn spoke about Tomlinson’s journey from Thornodyke Street to joining the ranks of those fighting for the Spanish Republic to his eventual death in action during the Ebro offensive of 1938.

William Tomlinson was an east Belfast Protestant who, emboldened by his belief in socialist politics, went to fight in Spain in what is often called the “last great cause” in defence of the Spanish democracy against the fascists.

His experiences in Belfast were set against the backdrop of the Outdoor Relief Riots, unemployment and depression.

Experiences which would shape and confirm him for many and others that went to fight in Spain that it is class and not creed that divided.

William Tomlinson was a true working class hero and deserves to be remembered in the collective memory of the working people of Belfast.

He is part of a hidden, and often unused, history, that transcends the sectarian divide and can be shared by all. The diverse attendance at the memorial was testimony to this.

The 1913 Lockout story brought to the internet

A new website has been launched as part of the build up to the centenary of the 1913 Lockout.

The www.1913committee.ie website seeks to prompt debate on this crucial juncture in Irish trade union history. Sponsored by SIPTU the site is managed by Padraig Yeates, the author of Lockout: Dublin 1913, the definitive history of the period.

“The aim is to bring together everyone who wants to remember, commemorate, celebrate and reaffirm the ideals of the men and women who fought for the rights of ordinary people in 1913. Obviously the best way to commemorate Ireland’s greatest industrial battle for workers’ rights would be to secure the right to collective bargaining, something enjoyed by the citizens of 24 out of the other 26 EU member states,” Yeates said.

He added: “We also want to monitor current developments that affect people’s lives although the item that has generated most interest so far is a long lost ballad from the midlands that celebrates the stand by canal workers in support of Larkin. Any information on the background to the ballad ‘The Big Strike of 1913’ would be very welcome.”

SIPTU’s historic links with Belfast

By Martin O’Rourke

SIPTU’s involvement with Belfast stretches back to 20th January 1907 when James Larkin arrived in the city as a delegate for the first annual British Labour Party conference.

His other objective was the organisation of Belfast’s 3,100 dockers – 2,000 of whom were casual ‘spells-men’ hired at low rates on a daily basis.

Wages and terms and conditions were poor even for regularly employed dockers – and their working week could be as long as 75 hours.

Larkin was also an organiser for the National Union of Dock Labourers (NUDL) and within a month of his arrival he had signed up 400 to the union.

By April, he had organised 2,000 workers. A combination of poor working conditions and the surge in trade union membership set the stage for the famous Belfast strike of 1907.

This dispute also involved 300 Belfast policemen who had refused to take action against the strikers.

The Government responded by drafting in 7,000 troops from Dublin – declaring martial law in all but name across the city.

In the end, Larkin was unhappy at the way his NUDL bosses had resolved the dispute and when he was dispatched to Dublin, he decided to form his own union, the Irish Transport and General Workers Union (ITGWU) – now SIPTU.

Belfast was represented at the inaugural meeting on the 28th December 1908 in Dublin and has had an unbroken link with the union ever since.

Belfast dockers in the main repudiated the NUDL to join Larkin’s ITGWU.

Over the years the ITGWU/SIPTU has had its offices at various locations throughout the city. Initially based at 11 Victora Street, the office moved in 1922 to 122 Corporation Street.

William McMullen, who worked here, would later become General President of the ITGWU. The union eventually moved its base to the Antrim Road – for the first time owning its own premises in Belfast.

Today the union office is at 3 Antrim Road. Five full-time staff work from this busy hub assisted by hundreds of activists – continuing the union’s proud links with the city, and ensuring Belfast continues to play its full role in the union.

The largest employers where the union organises in Northern Ireland are Northern Ireland Rail and Boots the Chemist as well in the community sector.

Belfast is a founding Branch of SIPTU and continues to fly the flag for the union – not just as an exercise in banner waving but as a constant reminder of an anti-sectarian, socialist voice for inclusion and equality within and across the local economy.

Martin O’Rourke is Lead SIPTU Organiser in the North
EGYPT

Not another lost revolution?

By Conor O’Gorman

LESS than four months have passed since the world looked on as millions of ordinary Egyptians took to the streets to demand change. Since then we have been dazzled with stories of the ‘Arab spring’, ‘Facebook Revolution’, stories of soldiers joining with civilians, of Muslim fundamentalists and Communist activists banding together to bring down a regime. But change has happened for Egyptians since Mubarak went and where does the Egyptian Revolution go from here?

These are the questions to which I sought an answer when I travelled to Egypt as part of a Solidarity Brigade organised by the World Federation of Democratic Youth.

The first thing I was struck by upon landing in Cairo on the 19th April was the huge military and police presence on the streets.

The police – once the backbone of Mubarak’s regime – broke ranks on 28th January, 2011.

After three days of protests which saw police beating and shooting demonstrators, they were faced with two million protesters and outnumbered 10 to one.

No longer were they supporting the new Military Council which has taken charge of Egypt.

But Tahrir Square – the symbolic centre of the revolution – is still a hive of activity.

Spontaneous meetings of every sort are now the staple feature of the Square. Many ordinary people who came from all walks of life to the demonstrations have decided to stay rather than return home.

On one corner a man stood speaking to whoever would listen to him. He told his story of how he was a small farmer whose land had been sold to a huge company. He came to Cairo seeking to change his country. They had replaced Mubarak with the military, he said, but the ordinary people had gained nothing from their sacrifice.

With a tear in his eye, he pledged he would stay in the square until the people’s revolution had been won.

A group of 20 chanted, ‘the people and the army are one’, while close by members of the Muslim Brotherhood cried ‘Allah Akbar’ and waved Libyan rebel flags.

In the midst of this, vendors sell t-shirts, key rings and other souvenirs. This unfolding under the watchful eye of the army. Tanks and APCs are parked down every side street ready to deploy at a moment’s notice.

The scene in the offices of political parties is greatly subdued when compared to the action on the streets.

In the hall of the Tagammu (National Progressive Unionist Party) headquarters, meetings of the youth section are held nightly.

Tagammu was the largest left-wing party not banned by the Mubarak regime. Although they opposed the demonstrations and participated in the round table talks called by Mubarak in the last days of his crumbling regime, they remain the dominant force on the Egyptian left.

Their youth section is involved in the Coalition of Revolutionary Youth (CRY), which, along with Union of Revolutionary Youth (URY), has emerged as the dominant organiser of left-wing protest.

The debate we witnessed was over whether to continue the protests, held every Friday since the resignation of Mubarak, or not.

The CRY argue that as Mubarak is now under arrest, there is no need to continue to protest while the URY claims the protests should continue as a means of honouring the martyrs of the revolution.

With the leadership of the Tagammu putting all its faith in this November’s election, it was clear nobody felt victory lay in the streets.

From Tagammu we went to meet the Communist Party of Egypt.

The CPE has been underground for many years. While always maintaining their organisation, they worked in secret for fear of repetition from the Mubarak regime.

Since re-emerging, the CPE has seen a surge in membership, as one new recruit pointed out, “I’ve always been a communist. I just didn’t know where the party office was.”

Here in the dark back room offices, you will find little of the optimism displayed in the Tagammu offices.

There is no faith in free elections – the elections are a sham.

When asked about the so-called “Facebook Revolution”, their answer was that only 7% of the population have access to the internet.

While social media did play an important role, it should not be forgotten that the largest protests took place after the regime had blocked all internet traffic.

Yet through every debate, every meeting, every public protest, one issue was missing.

Nowhere is the call being made to lift the illegal siege of Gaza.

Israel has never been able to hold the siege without the active support of the Mubarak regime – support which is stronger today than ever.

Despite some displays of solidarity with the plight of the Palestinians and calls to increase the economic boycott of Israel, Egypt ‘charges Israel for her natural gas, calls to increase the economic boycott of Israel but seems to take no real movement toward lifting the blockade ever so slowly.

So what was it all about? In the whole of Egypt it is doubtful that you will find too many people with the same answer to this question.

For industrial workers, whose strikes helped collapse the regime, they argue it was about wages and working conditions.

For students, it was about free education.

For militants of the Muslim Brotherhood, it was about establishing an Islamic state. But, it is clear that for all of them it was a desire for change and to bring down Mubarak.

Now he is gone and nothing has changed.

The unifying cause that brought millions together in defiance of the regime went with Mubarak.

The question for today is what path will the Egyptian people choose for themselves?

Will they continue their amazing march to freedom, or will Egypt become just another lost revolution?

Moreover, the court ruled that there was a “reasonable relationship” between the unions’ demand for a collective agreement and the damage caused by the actions.

The court noted that the unions complied with the law but ordered the company to pay the unions nearly €1 million in legal costs.

Following its court defeat, Bekken & Storm signed the collective agreement and joined the employers’ Confederation of Norwegian Enterprise. Maybe the wrong side won the battle of Clontarf after all.

Workers win when Viking rules apply...

By Padraig Yeates

ALMOST 1,000 years after the Battle of Clontarf we are still paying the price for opting out of the Nordic way of doing things. Not just when it comes to oil exploration but union recognition.

The Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions has used the threat of sympathetic strikes and a boycott of its members’ employers to force a company selling workwear to sign a collective bargaining agreement.

This followed a three-year battle for recognition. The unions initially approached Bekken & Storm AS in 2008 but it resisted every step of the way and was not bound by national agreements because it was not affiliated to any employer organisation.

It was finally forced to recognise the United Federation of Trade Unions (Pellesforbundet) and the Norwegian Employees in Commerce and Offices (HIK) union because Norway recognises the right of workers to use tactics that are illegal here.

After failing to make any progress in talks the unions brought their claim to the Norwegian national arbitration authority in late 2010.

Mandatory mediation proved unsuccessful and on 22nd November 2010 the unions served strike notice.

Company lawyers said the notice was illegal, violated the procedural rules of the Labour Disputes Act and the unions would be held liable for damages if the strike went ahead.

However, the Labour Court found the notice was lawful and the 19 employees went out on strike on 26th November.

To increase the pressure, the Norwegian United Federation of Trade Unions and HIK gave warning of sympathetic action by 500 workers in six freight-forwarding companies who would black Bekken & Storm from 19th January 2011.

The unions announced simultaneously that they would encourage trade unionists to boycott workwear sold by the company.

Again Bekken & Storm took legal action. But the Oslo City Court found that neither the sympathetic action, nor the boycott could be regarded as acts of negligence by the unions.
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News

OBITUARY NOEL KILFEATHER

Able organiser with a ready wit and hearty laugh

NOEL Kilfeather loved life. He loved to laugh and make others laugh with him and his quick wit could turn a disaster round or lift a frown. His job as a SIPTU rep allowed him to do what he was best at: help people with their problems. After his death, so many people came to tell Noel's family how he had helped them and how generous he had been. And he helped everyone – union and non-union alike – quietly and efficiently. He was a meticulous worker and worked first for Sinta and later as store manager for Abbott. He became senior shop steward at Abbott and then applied for the job as assistant to Tommy Higgins, who was then the ITGWU organiser in Sligo. Noel brought his great understanding of the working environment to his union post and, in 1992, he was appointed union rep for No 2 branch in Mayo. The union grew under his stewardship and he worked hard there. Noel was particularly proud of the contribution he made in taking on contractors and ensuring that their employees were paid and protected and that county councils and borough councils employed sub-contractors that adhered to this practice. He also put in place a scholarship scheme for the children of union members to encourage further education. Noel was a family man above all. He married his beloved Elaine and delighted in his three children Linda, Gillian and Colm and his grandchildren, Matthew and Ryan. He loved music and football and was a proud Sligo Rovers fan all his life and a regular at the Showgrounds. Noel enjoyed a pint with his friends in the pub and visitors to his home were always made welcome and royally fed and watered. He embraced his adopted county of Mayo but his heart was always in Sligo. Noel loved its history and culture and its beauty. In the months before his death, he still enjoyed a walk by the Garavogue River at Doorly Park, appreciating enormously how much work had been done by Borough Council workers to open up the area for walking and as a playground for children. People were the better for knowing Noel and he always left them with a smile on their face. He bore his illness with good humour and, even in his last few weeks of life, he was helping people and giving employment and redundancy advice from his bed. Noel touched people and cared for them and we knew it. We were lucky to have known him and we miss him enormously.

Rhona French
Noel Kilfeather died on 4th March 2011
Some employment contracts offer more than the legal minimum

By Michael Halpenny

In the last couple of articles we discussed the contract of employment and what rights it gives workers. One of the key inclusions in a contract of employment is the amount of notice which is required in order to terminate the employment relationship, which we will discuss now.

What is Notice?

Service
13 weeks – 2 years
2 years – 5 years
5 years – 10 years
10 years – 15 years
15 years plus

Notice
1 week
2 weeks
4 weeks
6 weeks
8 weeks

Contractual notice, which is written into your contract and which doesn’t necessarily follow the Act, may be either greater or less than statutory notice.

For example, a worker with four years service is entitled under the Acts to two weeks statutory notice, but may have one month’s notice written into their contract. In this case, they should get their (greater) contractual notice.

However, if they have 16 years service, their contractual notice of one month is less than their statutory entitlement of eight weeks under the Acts.

In this case it is their (greater) statutory notice which applies.

The Act also provides that employers are entitled to at least one week’s notice from employees employed for 13 weeks or more, and does not preclude the right of either the employer or the employee to terminate the contract of employment without notice, due to the misconduct of the other side.

In addition, there are a number of points which are worthy of note. Notice has to be certain (i.e. clearly defined) and, once issued, cannot be withdrawn except with the agreement of the parties (i.e. the employer and employee).

Notice has to be certain & cannot be withdrawn except with both parties’ consent

However, the right to notice can be waived by the employer and the Act does not preclude the payment of money in lieu of (in place of) all or part of notice itself.

Also, during the notice period, all employment rights are maintained. In other words, you are still an employee until such time as the notice period expires. Finally, there are special rules for calculating the service which counts towards your entitlements under the Act and these are found in the Schedule to the Acts.

What happens if you do not get your proper notice?
You can refer a claim to the Employment Appeals Tribunal and while you have a lengthy period within which to do so (six years), you are best advised to serve any claim as soon as you can.

The Employment Appeals Tribunal may decide that you have an entitlement to a specific period of notice and award compensation for any loss incurred to the value of the notice which has not been given, i.e. up to eight weeks pay.

A further appeal can be made to the High Court on a point of law only.

Michael Halpenny is head of SIPTU Legal Rights Unit.

Harris | Egan | Ballagh | Guggi

Flower for Gaza
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Soundings
Felim Egan

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Heart of the fearless faction

Limerick’s crime ghettos forged out of deprivation

Understanding Limerick: Social Exclusion and Change
Edited by Niamh Hourigan
Gorc University Press

THIS look at Limerick’s crime ghettos is the first systematic attempt to identify how a criminal state within a state arose and how it might well happen again elsewhere. Limerick has the most socially segregated suburbs in the state with 42% of units falling into the social housing category and, even at the height of the boom, the number of people living in poverty was 50% above the national average.

Lack of adequate planning or provision of amenities in estates such as Moyross and Southhill was storing up trouble for the future. But it was the destruction of traditional industrial employments in the late 1970s and 1980s, coupled with the IR£5,000 surrender grant that facilitated the exodus of working families and community activists, which tipped communities into crisis.

The nucleus of a new ruling class was formed among the most disadvantaged and excluded elements left. Crime was a rational strategy but it could only work if the beneficiaries could terrorise the law-abiding majority into compliance and this was done with the brutal efficiency of feudal barons.

One of the most insidious means was the recruitment of children to act as the eyes and ears of the gangsters. These youngsters also harassed residents who were not part of the gang culture.

Understanding Limerick is good at explaining the phenomenon of feuding, whether among what have become criminal families or Travellers.

While drugs provide the staple income for the gangs, it is the feud that perpetuates the violence and has the capacity to draw in others.

Significant progress has been made in containing the problem through community policing, the Criminal Assets Bureau and extra powers granted to the Garda by the 2009 Criminal Justice Act.

The Limerick Regeneration project is making further headway but the study is far from optimistic about the long-term prospects.

Digging up roots of 1798 rebels

Dissent Into Treason
By Fergus Whelan
Brandon books

THEOBALD Wolfe Tone, Henry Joy McCracken, the United Irishmen, the ideology now known as Irish republicanism has its beginnings with these radicals of the late 18th century. But who came before them?

This is the question that Fergus Whelan answers in his totally engaging account of Irish dissenters radicalism that spans from the Cromwellian invasion to Robert Emmet’s ill-fated uprising of 1803.

Although Whelan’s work starkly reassesses the impact of the 1640s Cromwellian conquest on the course of Irish history, there is no attempt to hide the horror of the New Model Army’s onslaught – fuelled both by sectarianism and an unshakeable belief that feudal despotism must be ended.

But among the ranks of the New Model Army were probably the first men – Levellers, Diggers, Quakers and others – to reach Ireland’s shores, who held it as an article of faith that society should not be ordered according to a person’s lineage and that freedom of conscience was a fundamental right.

From these men arose dissenter communities which would keep the “good old cause” of republican politics alive.

The story of these early republicans is linked through the generations to the United Irishmen and their ill-fated rising of 1798, in an easy-to-follow, highly-readable manner.

With a longer personal memoir in the making Kenny’s just over 100 page booklet is an inspiring glimpse into a life well lived, and leaves the reader’s appetite whetted for more accounts from those who stood for progress in a 20th century Ireland where the forces of a malignant conservatism were in the ascendency.

For copies of Sam Nolan: A Long March on the Left, contact: kenny-bj@eircom.net

Scott Millar
Swimmer Joe hopes for Athens glory

SWIMMER Joe Cullen is to represent Ireland at the Special Olympics World Games in Athens next month. A member of the SO Splashin’ Penguins swimming club in Sligo, Joe has also represented his country at the European Games in Belgium in 1999.

He was also a participant on the City Bridges ‘Moving On’ project, which is still going strong between Sligo, Derry and more recently, Omagh SO swimming clubs.

Joe is swimming in two events in the Athens Games – the 100m Freestyle and the 100m Individual Medley – a particularly tough event as all four strokes have to be swum in order. To prepare, Joe is undergoing rigorous training sessions both in Dublin and Sligo, under the supervision of coach Pat O’Malley.

Pat, a founder member of the SO Splashin’ Penguins club founded in 1998, reports that Joe is doing well in the workouts.

Pat said she is very proud of Joe and underlined that it was an honour to be teaching and training such a wonderful athlete who works hard and never complains.

She added: “We all wish him well in the upcoming games and hope that he comes back with at least one medal. “Good luck Joe!”

Dublin’s hurling success bodes well for the future

THE progress of Dublin hurling has been well documented since Anthony Daly’s team upset the odds to win the county’s first National League Division 1 title since 1999.

Underage victories, the 2001 launch of the Dublin County Board’s Hurling Blueprint as well as investment in resources has helped develop a culture of success for hurling in the capital.

So has the relentless promotional and development work of people such as former manager Michael O’Grady, Tom O’Donnell and Colin Mac Stéalaigh with the colleges, Sean Lane, Tom Fitzpatrick, regional panels, development squads and the Combined Colleges approach. Of course, contrary to the beliefs of some, the appointment of outside manager Daly – who has done an outstanding job – was the catalyst for the latest and most significant step yet.

Dublin has always been a dual county in that hurling is afforded parity in the fixtures calendar. But as the poor relation, particularly at county level, hurling needed a campaign of effective ‘positive discrimination’ to overcome traditional barriers in Dublin.

Strict policies in many traditional-ly strong football clubs, where dual players are given equal preparation time with both set-ups, has helped enormously. In 2009, for example, Ballyboden St Endas won both county senior championships. Serving too many masters can be a real problem in the GAA. But it has been accepted in recent years, even by football diehards in Dublin, that it shouldn’t be so at club level – particularly in a county rich in numbers.

Traditionally in Dublin, talented dual players would eventually just focus on football as they grew older. This is no longer the case.

Take the two promising county minor squads this year, managed by former county players Shay Boland and Dessie Farrell respectively.

There are four talented dual players being accommodated by both set-ups through good planning and communication. Which code these players eventually decide to focus on is not as predetermined as it once was. The decision of young dual players such as Tomás Brady and Liam Rushe to choose hurling over football at county level and established inter-county footballers like David O’Callaghan, Conal Keaney and Shane Ryan to switch codes reflects the new reality.

However, besides the benefits of proper planning and both codes accommodating each other, there is no doubt that the promotion of the game in the city has caught the imagination of Dublin’s youth.

That the senior hurlers have now succeeded in delivering a national title during a period where the county has been somewhat ironic in its luck, has more than paid off.

The decision of young dual players such as Tomás Brady and Liam Rushe to choose hurling over football at county level and established inter-county footballers like David O’Callaghan, Conal Keaney and Shane Ryan to switch codes reflects the new reality.

Dublin football may have had its difficulties in recent years but they too are well placed to push on and deliver a national title while the hurlers can now rightly claim to belong to the game’s top tier.

But of course the next step – the most difficult one – can’t be guaranteed for either squad. And the ranks of Dublin supporters will be accused of hyping up their chances, a tiresome accusation that misses the point of promoting games.

Yet with both codes heading in the right direction, hopes are high that GAA fans in the capital can at least look forward to a busy summer.
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