

THE DELEGATE

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SPECIAL MEETING PAYS TRIBUTE TO DEREK AND GEORGE

'The Council of Trade Unions and the Trade Union Movement in general has lost two deeply committed and conscientious people who cared very deeply for the members and changed lives for the better for thousands of workers'

Fitting tributes, such as these from Patricia King (ICTU General Secretary), marked the special meeting of the Council on Thursday 14th October as colleagues of both Derek Casserly and George Sheehan remembered their late comrades and friends.

The special meeting, the first 'face-to-face' one held since January 2020, took place in The Martello Hotel on the Seafront and was also attended by members of both immediate families.

Council President, Mary Diskin, referred to the huge contribution made by Derek and George to the Council over the years. She spoke of Derek's numerous proposals which were always well researched and he spoke with a huge passion and conviction about the causes which he wanted the Council to champion. Of George, she stated: 'As Council President George brought to his chairing of meetings an insightfulness and depth which reflected a thorough knowledge and acute understanding of workers' rights and their struggles clearly garnered through his long and dedicated experience in the trade union movement.'

Jack O'Connor (former General President of SIPTU) spoke of his privilege to have known both of them; George not coming from a traditional trade union background, being the son of a successful Arklow businessman, but clearly inspired by Larkin's 'divine mission of discontent'; and Derek applying himself assiduously to the job he loved. A wise man who thought through issues.

John King (Deputy General Secretary, SIPTU) who worked closely with George for years, remembered him as a person who did not want the limelight and also an astute reader of people. He had respect for people, including employers, as long as respect was given in return, whether they agreed or otherwise on matters.

Teresa Hannick (Divisional Organiser, SIPTU) spoke warmly of Derek whom she first met in Cork in 2010 when he was an activist. She had worked closely with him in more recent years and referred to his sound judgement on issues and being meticulous in his work.

Council Vice-President, Mick Ryan, remembered Derek as a young lad when he visited his granny on Soldier's Road (Oldcourt Park); as an apprentice barman in Lenihan's on the Main Street; and as a teenage piper with St. Kevin's Pipe Band. More recently, he had even learned, from Derek himself, that his own wife, Majella, had been in the same class with him in Ravenswell school and they had sung '76 Trombones' together in a school concert - and Majella confirmed that that was the case.

Kieron Connolly (Council Secretary) spoke of first meeting George on his own very first day as a trade union official with the ITGWU in Liberty Hall in 1981, when he replaced George as the representative of workers in Dublin Port. They had been close friends for 40 years. He also spoke of first dealing with Derek in Schering Plough on the Boghall Road and soon recognising his ability to represent union members there efficiently and effectively.

John Douglas (Mandate - former General Secretary) remembered Derek first as a trade union activist

when he was in the bar trade and he had spoken to him just the day before his untimely death. He had known George well down through the years particularly through their involvement on the Council and he was a deeply committed trade unionist.

Margaret Moynihan (Unite) spoke fondly of both as having unique talents. She considered that if you were to put them in a political context, then George was the Statesman and Derek was the Diplomat.

Judy Coolahan (INTO) recalled teaching Derek in St. Peter's school for a short time and even then you could see he was a conscientious and capable person. She spoke fondly of both being great characters who would be sorely missed on the Council.

Music was provided by Seoidín (which includes SIPTU delegate Antóin Mac Roibín) with Mick Heffernan also singing 'Raglan Road' and 'James Connolly' during the evening.

Following a minute's silence, the President, Mary Diskin, concluded the meeting by thanking the large attendance and particularly the two families, and hoped that it had been a fitting tribute to our two former colleagues and friends.

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NO GOING BACK

Below is the introduction by Gerry Murphy, President of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, to the Report of the Executive Council of Congress to the Biennial Delegate Conference held on the 26th and 27th October 2021 in Belfast.

This conference represents a new start in many ways. I don't simply mean this Congress which will have a new President almost four months later than planned. With a combination of good luck, hard science and social sacrifice, this conference will be among the first large-scale indoor event to take place on this island since March 2020. We all hope that you will be in the same hall as me when you read this, alongside hundreds of Trade Union activists possessed of the same will and determination that things cannot return to the *status quo ante*.

We may have missed the freedoms and certainties, even the dullness, of life before Covid-19. We may have hated the apprehension of mixing with colleagues and clients and students and the public. We may have gritted our teeth at the idea of another online meeting with novelty software over shaky broadband. We may have pined for travel, and companionship, and live arts and loud music.

But there many things to which we shall not easily return. The old accountancy of cutting safety nets and not investing in services. The old roads of travel by oil and gas and fossil fuels that are choking our climate and imperiling the hope of the young. The old distractions of reactionary politicians - scare stories about crime, or foreigners, or the poor - as they reward cronies with contracts and corporate welfare. The old excuses will not hold, that we cannot afford justice or mercy, and that there is no room at the tables of power for those of us with a wider agenda.

No Going Back is our response. Justice and equality is our agenda, as much as a prosperous economy delivering the economic means for our social ends. High quality, universally accessible public services funded through progressive taxation at home, with strong rights for working people and all citizens across the European Union. A Bill of Rights for people in both jurisdictions, as envisioned by the framers of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. Collective Bargaining rights for all workers across the EU, and an end to the endless race to the bottom among states seeking crumbs from the corporate elites.

There will be elections next year to the NI Assembly. There could be elections any time to the Oireachtas. British politics is so chaotic now, anything could happen, at any time. We need to get our arguments honed and our activists ready to make the case for a better and fairer way than after the last economic crisis when the least responsible for the crash paid the most for the recovery. In fact, that recovery never came for low-paid workers whose salaries are worth considerably less due to pay freezes

and welfare cuts affecting the working poor.

But we have examples of what happens when motivated workers combine smart negotiations with public agitation. We saw that last year in Newry, Mourne and Down District Council, the year before with workers from across our NHS and the steadfast belief of the workers in Harland and Wolff in their right to control their own destinies.

What those workers did was not let the market decide, nor 'common sense' dictate. They declared independence from that 'common sense' and built their own. All of those successfully resolved disputes involved multiple trade unions, and the active support of Trades Councils and the resources of this entire movement. There is a word for all that, 'Solidarity'.

That is a watchword for the months and years ahead, as we enter a new world after months of furloughs, and lockdowns, premature deaths, long-term health problems and urban landscapes of shops and offices eviscerated by the pandemic. But the social solidarity and human empathy exposed by Covid-19 cannot be erased so easily and, with persistence, can be directed more effectively in how we deal with each other as citizens and workers.

We know to what circumstances we are saying 'No Going Back'; this conference ought to help us find the alternative, a society which works well for all working people. I look forward to chairing these discussions.

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FIRST 'POST-PANDEMIC' BUDGET FALLS SHORT ON PREPARING FOR FUTURE CHALLENGES

ICTU General Secretary Patricia King has expressed concern about the lack of recognition for low-paid essential workers in Budget 2022.

Responding to the Budget measures, Ms. King said it was 'a retrograde step' that the Government has allocated one-third of the €1.5 billion discretionary package towards tax cuts, much of which will go towards increasing the standard rate band. She said it was a measure that 'will do nothing for the many low-paid essential workers that we have relied upon over the past 18 months'.

Ms. King said: 'The Government needs to address the scourge of low pay'. 'The Government's own Tax Strategy Group papers estimate that 750,000 employees earned less than €400 per week in 2019, representing 31% of the total Class A' PRSI employees. ICTU acknowledges the 30c increase in the National Minimum Wage but progressing towards the Living Wage and concrete measures to promote collective bargaining are essential to tackle low pay', she said.

'The economy clearly is in a much better position than it was this time last year. Measures proposed by ICTU and others to protect jobs over the worst stages of the pandemic, such as the TWSS, have helped to preserve the economy's productive capacity. As a result, we are now in the early stages of what is likely to be a very strong cyclical recovery.

'Though we still have some way to go in suppressing the virus, Budget 2022 could be described as being the first 'post-pandemic' budget.

'Contrary to the narrative that Ireland is a high public spending country, public spending per person in Ireland before the pandemic hit was 7.5% below the average of comparable high-income Western European countries, as research by the Nevin Economic Research Institute shows.

'ICTU is concerned that the Budget does not begin the process of providing Ireland with the resources needed to improve public services and to address the major challenges posed by the ageing of the population, the decarbonisation imperative and ongoing digital transformation in the workplace, amongst others.

'ICTU acknowledges the measures announced to improve early years' services and conditions for early years' professionals but we remain of the view that the most appropriate and efficient way to reform early years' services is through public provision'.

Ger Gibbons, ICTU Social Policy Officer, expressed disappointment that Budget 2022 did not give any clear indication as to the Government's plans to introduce a genuine European-type Short-Time Work Scheme (STWS) as previously announced by Government.

(Congress - 12th Oct 2021)

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KENYA'S COVID TIMEBOMB TICKS ON

Nobody is safe until everybody is safe. It is rare for a simple slogan about a complex situation to be so accurate. This one encapsulates the urgent need to share more Covid-19 vaccines with the developing world. The virus's propensity to mutate into even more lethal, globe-spanning variants means the rich nations moral responsibility to help protect the world's less well-off is matched by their self-interest in doing so.

This reality was brought home to me during a recent visit to Kenya, my wife's home country. An assumption has taken hold elsewhere in the world that Africa has been less badly impacted overall by Covid than other continents. But this is contradicted by the testimonies of many African healthcare professionals, which indicates this assumption is based on incomplete information and does not reflect the real situation.

The experiences of these frontline experts are certainly supported by the anecdotal evidence of our circle of family, friends and acquaintances in Kenya. We know people who have been killed or hospitalised by Covid. Others have been infected but suffered less severely. And these are mostly middle or higher-income Kenyans with access to decent healthcare.

Among the poorer sectors of society, each wave of Covid has impacted the densely packed, low-income urban areas more severely than the last. Mercifully, it appears Covid has yet to fully hit the rural regions, where medical facilities are scarce and nutrition is often inadequate. The human carnage that will result if Covid sweeps through the countryside before large-scale vaccination takes place is horrible even to contemplate.

Recent government statements about most hospital intensive care units already being full with Covid patients reinforce the perception of a nation on the brink of tragedy. In common with most African countries, Kenya has far fewer intensive care beds available per head of population than Europe and there is little capacity left to cope with a further spike in severe cases.

The secondary impacts of Covid on people's livelihoods and the prospects of future generations will cause substantial long-term harm to developing countries. These are the places that can least afford the hit and the damage will worsen the longer the pandemic continues unchecked.

In Kenya, the usually bustling centre of Mombasa, the main port and second city where our family home is located, was visibly quieter than normal during our visit. By all accounts, it has been so since Covid started. Some of this can be explained by people working from home. But this is happening less than in some other parts of the world where the infrastructure to support home-working is more widely available.

Worryingly, much of the reduction in activity can be attributed to small businesses and trading enterprises, upon which the economy relies heavily, having temporarily or permanently shut down. The number of family members who are supported by such businesses, including for school fees (which almost everyone must pay for secondary school) means the long-term consequences of this economic contraction may be disastrous.

Unlike in wealthier countries, the government lacks the funds to prop up the economy on a massive scale. There is never a good time for a pandemic, of course, but the timing of this one is particularly unfortunate for Kenya. The government has stretched the country's finances over recent decades by

taking out loans to fund the overhaul of the country's infrastructure. Repayment of some of these debts has fallen due at the worst possible moment, prompting the government to impose tax increases when many of its people are least equipped to pay.

As the wisest old uncle in our family pointed out, perhaps the greatest hidden damage done by Covid-19 to Kenya and developing countries worldwide will be the loss of education suffered by its children.

For most pupils, a whole year of school was cancelled in 2020. The better-off minority at least had the means to maintain online schooling. But the majority lacked the IT to do so. It is not yet clear how this missing year can be completely caught up. Worse, some youngsters have not been able to return to school at all for economic reasons including, in the case of some teenage girls, early marriage.

Kenyans value education intensely. They recognise its power to elevate the prospects of individuals, who can then give back and transform the lives of their whole families. Any major setbacks to this crucial means of social mobility will be felt deeply for generations.

The damage caused by Covid in Africa is already huge and heading for worse. Due to severely limited supplies, only about 3% of Africans have been fully vaccinated so far. In Kenya, any hint of new vaccine supplies arriving sparks a scramble to secure one of the badly over-subscribed jab appointments.

Meanwhile, millions of unwanted doses are passing their expiry dates elsewhere in the world and being destroyed. Decency and solidarity should compel the developed world to share more vaccines with the places that desperately need them. As should self-interest and the need to prevent variants.

(Paul Knott -TNE)

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THE MIXED MARRIAGE OF JAMES AND LILLIE CONNOLLY

Religion is a perennial topic of discussion for James Connolly's biographers and interpreters. What has made it so is Connolly's distinctive theoretical position in maintaining that religion and scientific socialism are compatible with one another and conflicting evidence regarding his personal attitude towards Catholicism. Was his adherence to his church a tactical pose necessitated by prevailing political circumstances or a genuine identification that may for a time have waned only to wax strongly again during the last years of his life?

Edinburgh-born, James Connolly was a soldier stationed in Dublin when his courtship of a Protestant domestic servant, Lillie Reynolds, began in the late 1880s. Connolly had deserted the army and returned to Britain when the couple, both in their early twenties, were married in Perth [Scotland] in 1890. A number of letters written by James to Lillie in this period survive and are included in the papers William O'Brien deposited in the National Library of Ireland. One, dated 6 April 1890, deals with the arrangements for their marriage:

Now, for another distasteful job. You know before a Catholic can marry a Protestant he must obtain what is called a dispensation from the Archbishop. I have applied for this dispensation and I am informed that it can only be granted on condition you promise never to interfere with my observance of my religion (funny idea, isn't it) and that any children born of the union should have to be baptised in the Catholic Church. Now I know you won't like that especially as the priest will call on you to ask you. But, Lillie, if your brother attended chapel for nearly a year for the sake of his sweetheart, surely you will not grudge speaking for a quarter of an hour to a priest especially as the fulfilment of these promises rest with ourselves in the future. Though I'd like you to keep them. Your brother you know had to make the same promises though perhaps he did not let his family know. Believing you will oblige me in this instance I shall send your Perth address to the reverend gentleman, when he will either call on you or ask you to call on him.

The extent of Lillie's dislike of or distaste for these requirements is not recorded but she must have obliged her future husband in the matter, and she was certainly a party to the promises being kept, as James wished them to be. The Connolly family were living in Dublin on the dates of both the 1901 and the 1911 census. All the children are recorded as Roman Catholic on the census forms while Lillie is returned as a member of the Church of Ireland. Decades after his death, a Dublin Irish Socialist Republican Party comrade of Connolly's recollected asking him why he brought his children up as Catholics. The reply, as John Lyng recalled it, was that 'where I was raised we hated the Protestants and I did not want the parson around as they are unbearable'. Perhaps as a consequence of a request made by James when they last met on the night before his execution, Lillie was received into the Catholic Church in August 1916. Giving up a familial Protestant affiliation she had maintained through more than twenty five years of marriage, she is said to have become a devout and activist Catholic during the more than two decades of her widowhood.

(Excerpt from a review essay 'Mixed Marriage and Irish Labour Biography' by Peter Murray, Maynooth University, - Saothar 46, Journal of the Irish Labour History Society, 2021)

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STARS AND GRIPES - THE STRANGE STORY OF THE EU FLAG

For many, it inspires cooperation and hope... for others annoyance. But what does the European flag actually stand for?

The stars on the flag do not represent the nations of the EU, despite the common perception that they do. Quite obviously there were once 28 nations, while the flag only has 12 stars.

So what, if anything is represented by the familiar gold stars on a blue background - whose office blazon (or heraldic description) is "on an azure field a circle of 12 golden mullets, their points not touching"? And how did said mullets and circle end up as the official emblem of the EU?

Firstly, its correct title is the 'Flag of Europe' because it can be used by institutions other than the EU. Its adoption by the Council of Europe, formed in the post Second World War era, in 1955 preceded its ratification by the European Community (EC), the forerunner to the EU, by 30 years.

And officially it can be used by pan-European organisations elsewhere, including sports teams such as Europe's Ryder Cup golfers. At the time of its acceptance by the EC, the UK argued that adopting the flag conferred some sort of statehood to the organisation so although official EC wording described it as a 'logo' or 'emblem' this has always been pretty much disregarded, more so following Brexit.

It certainly went through a lengthy gestation. The council appointed a committee in 1950 to look into proposals made by Paul Lévy for adopting a symbol to represent all of post-war Europe. Belgian-born Lévy, a journalist before the war, was the council's director of information and, significantly, a Holocaust survivor who had reported the liberation of the Dachau concentration camp. He had much personal investment in creating a symbol of a new Europe at peace with itself.

And while the incumbent flag is instantly recognisable it's perhaps illuminating to discover what was rejected. Many early designs included crosses. Lévy, of Jewish descent but a convert to Catholicism, believed a cross represented the stability of Europe but also marked a crossing point and four compass directions. But ultimately crosses were rejected because they were considered to exclude non-Christians. Ironically, in the light of what has subsequently happened - one of those rejected was the cross of St. George proposed by Count Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi.

Europe's oldest organisation, the Paneuropean Movement, had been founded in 1923 by Coudenhove-Kalergi, a polymath of Austro-Japanese descent who was first a Czech then a French national. Its flag of a blue background, with a yellow circle containing a red cross was also rejected on similar lines - adding a crescent did not allay Turkey's disapproval. However, the flag's colours would

later influence the final successful design.

Many early efforts incorporated the coat of arms of Strasbourg, home to the Council of Europe, but again these were declined as the council felt no single nation or city should be represented. The star of liberation used by the victorious Allied armies towards the end of the Second World War was also considered as was the striking design of a green E on a white background - symbol of the European Movement, created in 1948 with the goal of promoting European integration following wartime devastation.

Some designs were especially esoteric. Cartoonist Alwin Mondon's designs, all depicting a triangle - apparently a symbol of culture - were rejected for being too obscure. Erich Müller's red flag with gold "EUROPA" lettering and a white hand making the sign of the oath was considered too complicated, while Robert Poucher's reversed US-style stars and stripes was rejected for the more obvious reason of being likely to confuse.

In 1954 and 1955 after many earlier submissions Arsène Heitz's designs, based on one of those suggested by the Council of Europe's members themselves, began to coalesce around a blue flag with stars in some configuration. By September 1955, Heitz's latest design depicting 12 gold stars surrounding a central star - intended to represent Strasbourg with the others aligning around it - looked remarkably like the current flag. Three months later the council dropped its insistence on sky blue, lost the central star of Heitz's design, and the flag we recognise today became official.

The council formally described it as: "Against the blue sky of the Western world, the stars symbolise the peoples of Europe in a form of a circle, a sign of union. Their number is invariably 12, the figure 12 being the symbol of perfection and entirety." The EC later used similar wording but omitted "Western world".

Vexillologists, those who study flags, posit that five-pointed stars are representations of aspiration and education, their golden colour symbolising glory and enlightenment. Their arrangement on the flag represents the Corona Borealis constellation, their crown-like configuration noting stability. There's more, if such iconography is your thing: blue resembles the sky, truth and intellect.

Others see embedded religion. Twelve is the number of Christ's apostles, the number of sons of Jacob and the number of labours performed by Hercules. Blue is the colour that traditionally represents Mary, mother of Christ and in many paintings she is crowned with 12 stars. Of course, this can only be inferred, but in 1987 Heitz, a Catholic, rather late in the day gave weight to the suppositions by claiming he introduced so-called "Marian iconography" into his design after seeing a statue of Mary.

Other, more secular, critics have argued this all seems most unlikely considering the disparate peoples and belief systems Europe encompasses. Arguments such as this are simplistic, they say. Confirmation bias is likely at work. There are many other '12s' to choose if you are so inclined: the zodiac has 12 signs, there are 12 hours on a clock face or 12 months in a year.

For his part Lévy said he and his colleagues were unaware of any religious connotations - surely the intent of the council who had already rejected crosses. Lévy also added a further note of controversy by suggesting the flag design wasn't wholly Heitz's, claiming he had to grapple with Heitz's multiple submissions to distil them down to the final eloquent version, the exact design of which was his.

As one of the few non-national flags recognisable worldwide, the flag of Europe has benign intent, whatever some in the UK might proclaim - it has vexed and irritated some Brexiters, and it was once Brexit Party policy to ban it being flown in the UK.

Ironically, it has even been used by opposition movements in countries such as Georgia and Belarus as a symbol of protest against oppressive regimes.

It might have been a long and tortuous incubation, but the flag of Europe turned out rather tasteful in the end.

(Mick O'Hare - TNE)

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