

SOCIALIST LABOUR PARTY

EMBARGO 11 a.m. SATURDAY MAY 27th 1978

OPENING ADDRESS OF CHAIRMAN, MATT MERRIGAN,
TO THE POLICY CONFERENCE HELD AT LIBERTY
HALL, DUBLIN ON SATURDAY AND SUNDAY, MAY
27th AND 28th 1978

I have much pleasure in opening this first Policy Conference of the Party. It is my fervent hope that this weekend will mark a watershed in the development of a national debate on the necessity to weld together the serious socialist groupings on the left of Irish politics and to use that political bridgehead to thrust for state power to establish a Socialist Workers' Republic in the whole of Ireland.

This will mean confronting squarely the institutions and structures which derive from the essentially private enterprise, speculative and squalid nature of Irish capitalist society. Wealth and privilege stand cheek by jowl with grinding poverty and degradation suffered by almost one million people, or one out of four of our population, condemned by reason of old age, ill health, physical and mental handicap and the scandal of enforced idleness to these conditions of life.

It is our hope that all the layers of the oppressed in our society will, given honest socialist leadership, in which our Party will be seen to play a key role, respond to this leadership and build a Party capable of assuming state power and transforming in a revolutionary way property and social relationships - in a word Socialism.

In working for the achievement of Socialism in the whole of Ireland, all the political and historic factors which would tend to complicate and retard will have to be confronted and overcome. Any factors which will assist our cause must be cultivated.

OVER/

Retrospective recriminations about past historical or political phenomena and the facile attribution of to-day's problems to the deformities of political leaders and movements of the past - even the recent past - are only of relevance if they inhibit contemporary political progress.

Political assessments based on the sterile dogmas of yesterday offer no movement forward, nor is there any historical period past, present or future likely to throw up a politician, a political movement or a body of ideas that are immutable and eternal and incorruptible. If politics are about anything they are about accelerating the natural process of change in social and political organisation and systems of ideas and thought.

We must recognise as allies all who struggle against oppression of an external or indigenous character. Imperialism in its classical guise or in its neo-colonial forms of economic and political subversion must be defeated. All groups struggling against repression and the erosion of civil and human liberty must be supported if not uncritically then critically. Workers and trade unionists struggling for union democracy and workers' control of industry must likewise be supported and led by the Party.

There is no dearth of issues on which serious socialists can work to the advantage of all the oppressed people in Ireland. The achievement of socialism is not to vindicate its theorists or their theorems. Politics, least of all Socialist politics, are not conducted in controlled laboratory situations. Politics in Socialist terms are the liberation of people from exploitation and oppression. Sometimes the theory has to be modified to fit the maddening idiosyncracies of people. Rhetoric and reality are not always compatible.

The reality of contemporary Ireland is that hundreds of thousands of workers are condemned to a life of idleness and deprivation. There are hundreds of thousands of persons living on subsistence pensions and welfare payments. Thousands of small farmers are living below subsistence level. Thousands need homes. Thousands of men and women have intimate sexual and marital problems which are compounded by outmoded laws that are reactionary and sectarian in intent and effect. Thousands of women continue to be discriminated against. All these groups of persons will only relate to us as a Party if we continue to express concern on their behalf and offer them and struggle with them for policies which will end the system that condemns them to lives of frustration and poverty.

The three main political parties, Fianna Fail, Fine Gael and Labour, do not see the necessity for a revolutionary transformation of society. They are populist and social democratic and are pledged to maintaining in an integral way private enterprise, capitalism and its acquisitive ethos which promote and exist on the exploitation by the few of the many. Whether Fianna Fail or National Coalition are in office the wealthy and privileged get wealthier and more privileged and the poor and underprivileged get poorer.

The appearance of moving the fiscal pieces on the social chessboard whilst allowing the economic hegemony of wealth to continue is a classical social-democratic exercise in duplicity. Whilst trade unionists and workers generally had their incomes restrained since 1970 by National Wage Agreements and before that by the heavyweight tactics of employers; profits continued to boom and all non-wage and salary incomes were inflated at a rate which was substantially higher than that applying to work people. One has only to look at Bank profits this year as an indication of this general trend. The Combined Banks made in excess of £100 M. profit, an average rise of 35% whilst workers wages under the 1977 Wage Agreement rose by less than 10%.

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It is a task of this Conference to set down our policy position for the coming period in the spheres covered by the draft documents. From the volume of amendments and addenda they will be substantially changed by discussion and decision of the membership. In the light of future developments these positions will have to be reviewed and updated and it is therefore necessary for those Branches of the Party who were unsuccessful in having their particular view accepted that there will be another day in these and other policy areas where they can try again.

As Chairman of this Conference I would appeal for the utmost co-operation in the conduct of the Conference. Standing Orders Committee reports on the arrangements will of necessity have to be applied if we are to complete the work of this Conference. I also would like to confound the critics of this Party by demonstrating that we are a serious mature people about the business of achieving Socialism in the whole of Ireland and that whilst we may differ on the tactics and rhetoric, the central strategy is the creation of Socialism in Ireland and that this can best be achieved by a strong democratic yet disciplined vanguard Party of the workers and oppressed peoples of Ireland.

Let the Socialist Labour Party and all the tendencies in it take up that challenge on behalf of the Irish people in a determined united way.

If there are those amongst us who see these tasks being performed better by any other organised entities outside and apart from the Socialist Labour Party, I would respectfully ask them to formally join and work within these organisations and let the rest of us get on with some serious work.

Title: Opening Address of Chairman, Matt Merrigan,
To the Policy Conference Held at Liberty Hall, Dublin
on Saturday and Sunday, May 27th and 28th 1978

Organisation: Socialist Labour Party

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