

# Forces to be reckoned with: The Irish language today

Somhairle Mag Uidhir

## Introduction

Sitting on the floor of the Education Authority (EA) office in Belfast, as part of a sit-in protest in March 2017 against cuts to Irish language youth services, it was hard not to be reminded of Mairtín Ó Cadhain's famous speech, *Gluaiseacht na Gaeilge, Gluaiseacht ar Strae* ('The Irish language movement, a movement astray'). Ó Cadhain was a socialist and republican from Conamara, who rightly holds a place among Ireland's literary greats, and its political giants. And it is in this speech, made in 1969, that Ó Cadhain makes many of his most memorable political statements. Whether it was the sharpness with which he tackled the difficulties facing the Gaeltacht, or the connections he made between the Irish language and wider issues in Irish society, it was an address that has left its mark on Irish language movements ever since<sup>1</sup>.

Indeed on that particular day last year when young Irish speakers, faced with the closure of their youth clubs, decided to occupy the EA, it was Máirtín Ó Cadhain's call for the Irish language movement to consider civil disobedience as a tactic that resonated most. Events North and South over the past two years have provided countless other reminders of his words. It has been a unique period in the history of the language, one highlighting both the challenges facing the Irish language community, as well as the potential for change.

This article is an attempt at an analysis of where Irish is at today, in the short space provided to me; how it got here, and what forces affect it on a daily basis. It will try to show that the Irish language community must take seriously the destructive force of capitalism in Ireland - as seriously as we should take British colonialism's destructive influence in our history. Just as importantly, this article will emphasise that socialists must be committed to fighting on questions related to the Irish language, as part of any movement for a fairer, better Ireland. The rights and future of the language and its

speakers are an integral part of any successful socialist project here, for reasons of principle *and* of strategy.

## The Lay of the Land Today

Depending on where you look, the current situation for the language can either make for extremely uncomfortable reading, or provide some cautious hope. According to the most up-to-date census statistics, Irish is spoken by 4.2% of people on daily basis in the Republic, outside of the education system, and some 39% of people have 'some knowledge of the language'.<sup>2</sup> The equivalent figure in the North is hard to estimate, but census figures from 2011 say that roughly 6% of people are fluent, while 11% of people 'have some knowledge of the language'.<sup>3</sup> The language, on both sides of the border, is clearly used by a minority of people. But what is its trajectory - is its usage on the up or on the down?

To start, Gaeltacht communities - those communities mostly dotted around the west coast wherein Irish is the language of daily life - are in dire straits. According to a recent report by Udarás na Gaeltachta, ten years is the maximum number of years that Irish has to survive as the dominant community language in *any one* of the Gaeltacht communities.<sup>4</sup> This is a deeply concerning state of affairs. For the most part, the remaining Gaeltacht areas represent an unbroken linguistic line for over two thousand years. The recent census reveals, among many other problems, that many Gaeltachts are haemorrhaging young people at rates often worse than the rest of rural Ireland.<sup>5</sup>

In the rest of the South, it appears on paper that some progress is being made. The number of speakers in urban centres is growing, the demand for Irish Medium Education (IME) is on the rise, and there appears to be a mini-revival happening in terms of the social outlets for Irish speakers, taking the Irish out of the classroom.<sup>6</sup> Huge problems (such as emigration) still remain however, and of course any progress is understandably overshadowed by the situation in the Gaeltacht.

North of the border, while Irish lacks the legal rights afforded to it in the South, which I will focus on later, and while it arguably exists in a more hostile environment, there can be little doubt that the Irish language community is growing. The IME sector is on the rise, with 400% growth in the past fifteen years, and the number of children enrolled is expected to double in the next seven years.<sup>7</sup> The avenues for using Irish outside of the classroom have exploded. Attitude surveys show rising appreciation and interest in the language.<sup>8</sup> While numerous problems remain, and progress should not be taken for granted, much of the positive news in terms of Irish today comes from the North. That this is the case is no mere fluke - instead it's a result of the historical development of Ireland, from colonial times past on through to today's brand of capitalism.

Before giving a brief overview of that development, it should be noted that Irish is in a precarious position is not a phenomenon wholly unique to Ireland. Across the world, the last speakers of 3,500 languages are alive today. According to UNESCO, of the world's 6,500 languages, one dies every ten days. With each passing a whole history of human experience, of thought and of culture, are gone. A rate of linguistic extinction such as this has never before been seen in the whole history of humanity.

### **Colonialism and its Legacies**

Explaining the history of Ireland without including the central role of British colonialism would be like explaining why apples fall from trees without referring to gravity: you could try it, but the result would be worthless. The same is true of the history of the Irish language. Any Marxist analysis of Irish must include colonialism among its core factors.

Irish was a target of British policy in Ireland from as far back as the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Following (or maybe beginning) an international pattern, Britain decided that as part of its efforts to control Ireland and its resources it needed to establish English as the dominant language. It is arguable how successful efforts were, or how vigorously they were pursued, for the first four hundred years or so; English was the main administrative tongue, but Irish was spoken by the vast majority of the population. In contrast, there is no doubt that the Cromwellian conquests, the plantations, and the penal laws of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century constituted a decisive turning point

for Irish. It was at this period and with these changes that Britain began to make it increasingly difficult for the wider population to live their lives through Irish. This is the key point. The British administration systematically discriminated against the use of Irish in an ever-increasing number of arenas. It also incentivised switching to English. Of course, resistance was widespread, and therefore severe punishment and violence were part and parcel of the colonial approach. And of course, no account of the Anglicisation process in Ireland is complete without reference to what Pádraig Mac Piarais dubbed 'The Murder Machine': the British-administered school system, in which after 1831 'a regime of corporal punishment in school and at home designed to prevent the speaking of Irish was instituted'.<sup>9</sup>

Despite all these material and ideological pressures, history shows that it can be fairly difficult to get people to stop using their mother-tongue. The Great Hunger dealt a decisive blow. Whereas before the 1840s Irish was still the majority language, the widespread death and emigration of the poorest parts of the population resulted in English finally taking up that mantle.

Following the centuries of this oppression visited upon Irish speakers was a particular ideological legacy. That legacy was often one of lacking confidence, of being ashamed of Irish and of relinquishing identities associated with it. But it is important to remember that this ideological legacy was first and foremost a result of the everyday experience imposed on Irish speakers by British colonial rule. As Marx said, 'It is not the consciousness of people that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness.' No doubt Britain mercilessly pushed an ideology of the inferior and feckless Irish speaker (and Irish person more generally). But this ideology had a purchase precisely because their rule forced Irish speakers into a vastly inferior position in society, excluding them from the jobs, roles, (and sometimes privileges), afforded to those who eventually succumbed to speaking English. There is a valid debate to be had as to what extent this ideological legacy lives on among Irish speakers over a century later. But insofar as it may, it must be recognised that Irish speakers will be far more likely to see themselves as inferior if our current system treats them as such.

Today Irish is a minoritised language - minoritised

as a result of centuries of British policy geared towards wiping it out. In *Language From Below*, Caoimhghín Ó Croidheáin summarises James Connolly's opinion on why the language survived, saying that for him it was 'symbolic of the revolutionary spirit of the people'.<sup>10</sup> I will return to this revolutionary spirit, and its crucial role in maintaining Irish, but first I want to deal with the effects of another legacy of colonialism: that of partition.

### **Irish in a Partitioned Ireland**

When Ireland was partitioned in 1921, it brought a new reality for Irish. With the founding of the Free State came hope for a new dawn as many language activists, intimately involved in the struggle for independence, became part of the institutions of the new state. However, in this period the language movement actually receded, arguably due to a belief that the work to preserve the language was now done, and more fundamentally because of the counter-revolutionary settlement that was imposed. And although over the course of the next decade the new government managed to implement a fair amount of language reforms, they failed to enact the kind of deep structural change that was really required. Éamon Ó Ciasán wrote of this time: 'One cannot quibble with the sheer economic logic of learning English to go to the market, get a job under the Irish state, or to emigrate. This logic has been the motor of language change...'<sup>11</sup> To tackle that 'sheer economic logic' needed more than just cosmetic lifts.

Instead, the attitude of the southern state to the language was contradictory and often hypocritical.<sup>12</sup> As Taoiseach, Eamon De Valera used Irish as a tool in his wider vision for a conservative Catholic republic. This was a republic where Gaeltacht communities were held up as the closest representatives of a mystical Ireland of 'comely maidens at the crossroads', while in reality they were made to face the brunt of harsh economic and social conditions. The Church held sway over the teaching of the language, shaping it decisively, and it was often used as a crutch for the elites to maintain their power; it helped prove their 'Irishness'. Irish was seen as the preserve of the upper echelons of Irish society - the working class people of the republic were systematically discouraged from feeling any kind of attachment to it, much less ownership of it. Among the many tragedies befalling the language in this period, this was one of the

most shameful.<sup>13</sup>

Caoimhghín Ó Croidheáin summarises concisely how we should view the different ruling class' orientation towards Irish: 'The status of the Irish Language in Ireland is dependent on the political ends or needs of elites in Irish society'.<sup>14</sup> From the late fifties on, the Republic of Ireland broke from its previous economic system, De Valera's protectionist capitalist model, and gradually moved towards a free-trade, tax-haven based set-up.<sup>15</sup> The top layer of Irish society no longer had the same use for the language. Gone were the days when they needed to proclaim that they were part of the heroic line of brave Irishmen, from Tone to Mac Piarais. Gone were the

days when politicians wanted to accompany every government policy with anti-British rhetoric. Britain was now Ireland's biggest trading partner. As the decades went by, although the Irish elites were unable to ditch their lip service completely, the language came to be associated increasingly purposefully with a 'backwards' Ireland, a thing of the past. The second half of the 20th century saw a continual and dramatic decline in the size of Gaeltacht areas and a constant struggle by Irish speaking communities in the South to make the government take it seriously.

A natural question arises here. What drove this shift in economic policy, and the resulting change in attitude towards Britain and the Irish language? In my opinion, Kieran Allen argues effectively that it is not accurate to describe Ireland as a neo-colony of Britain during this period. That is, the Irish state's policies were not a result of being a puppet on the end of a British string, whether knowingly or not. Instead, it was *Irish* capitalism, looking out for the interests of distinctly *Irish* capitalists, which demanded the shift towards the free-market approach in the fifties.<sup>16</sup> And crucially for the purposes of this article, the shift away from inward-protectionist capitalism, to global, uninhibited capitalism, (at the behest of Irish capital), fundamentally underpinned the state's orientation to all matters in society, the Irish language included.

The situation was arguably much worse in the northern state where the Unionist Party's attempts to solidify control of the new 'Protestant state for a Protestant people', resulted in Irish being essentially outlawed. By the end of the 1920's, the last Gaeltacht in the North (in Tyrone) died out, and the number of speakers was dan-

gerously low. Discrimination of an often vitriolic nature towards the Irish language became a permanent feature. It has taken a momentous struggle from below to reverse the tide and to begin the next revival; the revival that we are seeing across the North today.<sup>17</sup> However alongside the growth of Irish there, the sectarian and bigoted attitudes towards it also live on. The past twelve months have seen an extraordinary level of abuse and propaganda emanating from virtually all echelons of political unionism - a blunt reminder of the reactionary elements of much of the northern state.

Simply put, partition created two rotten states on this island. And in their own specific ways, both these states solidified and deepened the damage that had been done to Irish over the preceding centuries by colonialism. The Northern state, for the majority of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, followed on colonial policies of prohibition and discrimination. Over the same period, the Southern state was first unsuccessful in turning the tide on the decline of Irish, before later adopting a model of capitalism diametrically opposed to the protection and growth of a minoritised language. To see why capitalism in general is diametrically opposed to the protection and growth of a minoritised language, we first need to look at what such languages actually need - at what Irish actually needs.

### **What the Irish Language needs today**

In general, if people are to be able to freely choose to live their lives through Irish, whether they're born with Irish or not, they cannot be materially disadvantaged by doing so.

If the Irish language is to survive and thrive, the lives of Irish speakers cannot be materially affected when they choose to live through Irish. That is, they can't be disadvantaged in their professional or personal lives, they must have the same access to public services, and the education system must put them on an equal footing in the search for jobs. They must be able to lead as fulfilling a social life in Irish, as what is available to them in English, and they cannot experience alienation or discrimination because of their language. The state must respect their language choice, and they also need to be able to deal with the private sector in Irish too. Otherwise, if these requirements are not met, people will be forced into choosing between a life in English under capitalism and all that entails, and a more difficult and awkward life under capitalism through Irish. This is the

kind of choice that has been presented to people all over Ireland, in various forms, for the past 100 years. That this has consistently been the option facing people is the *material basis for language change*.

This is not about casting any kind of aspersions on people. Life under capitalism is hard. In general, if it is much easier to live your life through a language that dominates all around you, like English, most people will eventually do that. Not because people are in some way weak or flawed - any analysis that blames language change on 'individual failings' should be rejected out of hand. In fact it is in recognition of this general tendency among people that the work of language activists the world over has been in trying to both normalise and to *make it easier* for people to speak a minority language.<sup>18</sup> Any attempt at making it easier must tackle economic, political, judicial and social aspects.

Today, in Ireland, there are a number of measures and demands that are needed as part of any mass movement to make it possible for people to live their lives through Irish uninhibited. The following paragraphs are intended to show the *types* of things we need, and it is not in any way exhaustive.

In the South, Irish has suffered heavily from the effects of austerity, with language funding down roughly 70% since the crash.<sup>19</sup> Properly funding IME, and bodies and groups dedicated to protecting and promoting the language, is something the right-wing ideologues in the Fine Gael Government have neglected to do for far too long. Investment into education, family supports, creating cultural hubs and social outlets for the language, would all help towards making it easier to speak Irish day-to-day. In the constitution Irish is the first language of the state, and while legal status and formal rights for the language are both important, they cannot exist in a vacuum. Currently the state's provision of services through Irish is extremely poor, and thus we should support the demand for a reform of the Official Languages Act. Among other things, it would put a duty on public bodies to provide services through Irish, replacing the current system where the standard of those services depends on the benevolence of civil servants and ministers.<sup>20</sup>

Specifically in Gaeltacht communities, long overdue strategic investment is urgently needed. While much of this should mirror the investment already necessary into rural Ireland, directed at improving infrastructure,

providing employment, rolling out broadband etc, particular linguistic necessities must also be recognised. Currently many Gaeltacht communities are involved in language-planning, a vital part of regenerating the language in those areas in line with international expertise. However, the Irish government are disgracefully refusing to pay out the paltry sums required to properly fund this language-planning process. These projects need funding, and wider investment needs to be in line with the specific linguistic needs of these communities. Reforms that would see better resourced Irish-medium Gaeltacht schools are also crucial.

Behind smiling faces and multimillion euro spin units, the current Irish government is completely opposed to investing in a fairer and more equal society. In terms of Irish, they'll excel at the cúpla focal, but only in order to hide a shameful head-in-the-sand approach to the slow destruction of Gaeltacht communities.

Much of what was stated above around the need for resources is as true for the North as it is in the south. Irish language speakers in the North need investment to protect and grow the language. However unlike the South, the North lacks an Irish language Act (ILA). It is this reasonable and worthwhile demand for equality that has been the cornerstone of a year dubbed *An Bhliain Dhearg* (The Red Year' - from Irish campaigners adopting red as their identifying colour). It has been a year which has brought thousands onto the streets and decisively shaped the political direction of the northern state, all in the name of an ILA. But while an ILA act will not solve all the issues facing the language, the absence of one doubtlessly makes the project of overcoming them much more difficult. An ILA codifies into law the rights of Irish speakers, as well as placing certain limited obligations on the state in terms of supporting the Irish language community.<sup>21</sup>

The language requires a variety of different reforms, of which the above is just a flavour - albeit I would argue that these are vitally important. They all have a similar theme. Whether it is the creation of jobs on the northwest coast of Donegal, the building of an Irish language community centre in Dublin, the support for a growing IME sector, or indeed the introduction of an Irish language act in the north - all of these measures require money. They require investment. They require decisions to be made about how resources are shared

and distributed in our society.

Any movement that wants to protect and grow the language today must get its hands on a lot of resources, and therein lies the problem. We live under a tax-haven based capitalism in the South, and under a deeply-flawed neoliberal and reactionary state in the North. Neither of these societies gives up resources easily.

### **Capitalism as a system based on competition**

The following is a short argument for why capitalism systematically limits the resources available to us.<sup>22</sup> Capitalism is a system based on competition. Many of the prerequisites for human survival - food, shelter, security etc. - are produced for profit and controlled by a tiny minority of people. In order to gain access to these necessities the vast majority of the population must sell their labour power. That is, they must go to the 'market' - to employers - and offer up their ability to work in exchange for wages, the only means by which they can gain access to the necessities of life. Production in society - how we make and create and maintain all the goods and services we use and need on a daily basis - is not organised on the basis of human need. Rather it is organised, at all levels, around making a profit.

At a basic level, firms need to sell their products for more than the cost of making them - they need to make a profit. Also, it is crucial that they compete with the firms around them. If they don't, and one company makes more profit than another, year after year, the more successful company starts to eat into the business of the weaker one. The bigger company can afford to spend more on advertising, to spend more on making its business more efficient and eventually the weaker firm's profits start to fall. If this carries on, the smaller business can either go bust or be bought up by the larger company.

So why is this relevant to the fight for language resources? Well critically, this dynamic *does not* depend on the personnel in charge. This system, the need for companies to make more profit than their competitors, means that if the people in charge aren't up to the task of being ruthlessly profit-driven, then either their ventures will fail, or boards and shareholders will find people who are up to it. And this is the basis on which our society is organised - the basis on which resources are allocated. Who gets what in our society is decided not in the interest of who needs what, but in the interest of

maximising *profits*.

Of course, the state also has a big role in allocating resources. But the state's power to spend money, to invest, to build things and to provide support in large part comes from its ability to raise taxes. The main source of tax revenue in advanced capitalist countries comes not from taxing citizens' pay, but from taxing the profits of companies. Our own experiences in Ireland, North and South, over the past century should make it crystal clear that politicians need to be forced to act in the interests of ordinary people. But in case there is any lingering hope that we've just been unlucky and *better* politicians could do a better job, the above should make clear that there's a limit to what they can do. The fact that the state's tax revenue is so heavily reliant on private companies doing well means that even with the best political representatives imaginable, the state under capitalism will always lean towards the interests of profit, eventually if not necessarily overnight.

The private sector - capitalists and their firms - won't give up the resources we need, because that would eat into the profits they *need* to make. They will fight tooth and nail against corporation tax increases, for example. And while the state can be pressured into delivering resources, those resources can never be taken for granted, especially when capitalism goes into crisis, and it will always look to keep the capitalists who control the resources happy. This state of affairs is true regardless of the personnel in charge, and this is what makes capitalism so dangerous and destructive. It forces us to compete for scraps, when there is so much more than that to go around.

The political set-ups on either side of the border differ in many ways. One comes out of a deeply conservative Catholic lineage which always paid a certain amount of lip service to Irish. The other comes out of a reactionary sectarian configuration which openly discriminated and suppressed Irish. In the South, the lip service lives on. In the North, notwithstanding its changed nature since the days of outright Unionist dominance, the discrimination and suppression has not disappeared. These political barriers to the development of the language must be actively removed by movements from below. However the crux of the matter is this; capitalism is a force independent of political set-ups which systematically works against minoritised languages and against Irish in particular. And therefore the conclusion must

be drawn that the Irish language community most definitely has to tackle the right-wing and reactionary power of the Fine Gaels and the DUPs of this world, *but it cannot stop there*. Only a root and branch challenge to capitalism, and a society where we decide democratically who gets what, can guarantee a future for the Irish language that is worth fighting for. Otherwise too much is left to chance in a system that would rather destroy its own planet than give up a penny of its profits.

### **Ná hAbair É Déan É**

Up to now I've looked at the current status of the language, what it requires in order to grow, and some of the systemic blocks to that growth. This is only part of the picture however - the bleak part. Given the brutality of colonialism, and the pressures of capitalism, you could easily be forgiven for asking how exactly Irish has managed to survive at all. This article can't do justice to the people and the movements that have ensured it remains a possibility to learn and speak and experience Irish today. Suffice to say, for as long as efforts to eradicate Irish as a living language have been around, so too has resistance. From daily local acts of disobedience spanning hundreds of years, to Conradh na Gaeilge and the cultural revival at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, to Gluaiseacht Cearta Sibhialtana Gaeltachta ('Gaeltacht Civil Rights movement') that began in 1969, or to the setting up of Bunscoil Phobal Feirste in Belfast in 1971 - there is a long and proud history of fighting in the face of adversity to keep the language alive.

A particular insight can be gleaned from the setting up of Bunscoil Phobal Feirste, whereby a handful of families built their own primary school and set about creating their own mini-Gaeltacht in the heart of West Belfast. Underpinning that movement was the simple mantra of *Ná hAbair É, Déan É!* ('Don't say it, Do It!'). This mantra has been to the fore in virtually every Irish language project and struggle across the North since the 1970s, encompassing ideas of self-activity and not waiting for the state, or anyone else, to grant any kind of permission. It fits neatly with Connolly's idea of the 'revolutionary spirit of the people'.<sup>23</sup>

And *Ná h Abair É, Déan É* has been a guiding principle in the recent fight for language rights. It would be impossible to write an article in 2018 about the Irish language and not mention the latest stage in this proud history. The movement for an Irish language Act (ILA)

over the past eighteen months in the north has been nothing short of phenomenal and the effects of it will be felt for a long, long time.

This level of language struggle is unprecedented, and the language has never been so influential to northern politics. The campaign group An Dream Dearg, sparked in response to a failure of SF/DUP government to provide for the language, most notably led a historic 15,000 people on a march through the streets of Belfast. Rights for Irish language speakers became one of the main sticking points in forming a new executive in the North and ultimately prevented it. Ordinary people, through their own agency, put the language back on the agenda, and pressured political parties to get their act together.

Mass campaigning on the streets has advanced the cause of the language further in the past two years than ten years of SF and DUP power-sharing. This is no accident - people power gets the goods. History teaches us many lessons - among them that the greatest advances for fairer and more equal societies have all come about through mass movements from below. The events of the past eighteen months confirm as much.

Another key takeaway is how this radical, political struggle has led to an eruption in interest and participation in all things Irish language. From cultural events to political discussions and everything in between, Irish is buzzing. Across the main centres that provide adult Irish language classes, there has been an average attendance increase of nearly 74%.<sup>24</sup> This shouldn't be surprising either. History shows us that grassroots political movements have a tendency to produce explosions in cultural expression and output. The general lesson should be that getting stuck in to the political struggles around the language doesn't distract from the cultural side - in fact the two are mutually reinforcing.

### **Where now for the red year?**

Calling on the northern language movement to stay on the streets would be virtually superfluous - there is no danger of it receding from them anytime soon. Instead, I want to argue for a number of strategies to be pursued. Mass movements change history, and therefore it is extremely important that the movement remains as broad as possible. Including and motivating large numbers of people can often be slow work, requiring energy and patience, but it is necessary when trying to increase participation. The Irish language campaign

must stay big. With this in mind, and for many practical reasons, the movement should be organising itself on a 32-county basis.

The success of the campaign for an ILA cannot be separated from the simplicity and unifying nature of the demand itself. In all the offshoot local campaigns around signage etc. a connection should constantly be made between the campaigns themselves and how they relate to the lack of an ILA. The movement should absolutely continue to hammer the DUP for its bigotry and obstructionism. But it should not fall into the trap of assuming SF no longer needs to be pressurized. SF's record on the Irish language is not without significant blemish, and this should be recognized. For ten years the party failed to deliver on an Irish Language Act at Stormont, nor did they ever make it a red line issue in forming a government with the DUP from 2007-2017. SF Ministers were also implicated in the enforcement of austerity on various Irish language groups in the North in 2014 through Foras na Gaeilge, and Belfast's only Irish Language secondary school Coláiste Feirste was forced to take a SF minister to court simply to provide a bus for their pupils.

Throughout both the 2017 Assembly election, and again in hustings during the 2017 Westminster election, SF repeatedly refused to say that an Irish Language Act was a red line issue. Indeed a Conradh na Gaeilge questionnaire to political parties confirmed that the only party willing to say that an Irish Language Act was a red line was People Before Profit.<sup>25</sup>

Under pressure from below SF's position has since hardened. But the recent leaked proposed deal between SF and the DUP was in fact remarkably weak on the Irish language, despite the howling of unionism. The deal contained no detailed legislation, only a general agreement on broad principles (leaving the door open to further obstruction by unionism in the future), and guaranteed a future veto for the DUP on the role of an Irish Language commissioner. Considered alongside the fact that equal marriage would not be contained in the deal either, and Tory spending plans would be adhered to as well, there can be no doubting that the deal SF was touting was woefully weak.<sup>26</sup> A stark reminder, therefore, that SF cannot be relied upon, even when it comes to the Irish language.

The Irish language and its speakers do not exist in a

vacuum. They are a part of society. To state the obvious, they require decent housing and healthcare, as well as good quality jobs. Many lack abortion rights, and suffer gender and sexual discrimination. These naked truths, alongside the simple fact that we are stronger together, means that the language movement should reach out and attempt to build a wider movement again, one which tackles the many injustices in our society.

Finally, as argued above, capitalism presents a very real and systematic danger to the language. There is no doubt to my mind that a successful language movement must begin to analyse capitalism in 21<sup>st</sup> century Ireland, and become an active part of a challenge to it. It is in the interest of those who want to see Irish maintained as a viable living language to fight for a different way of organising our society - which puts human need at its forefront. Put simply, it is in the interest of the Irish language movement to be socialist.

### **Socialists and the Irish Language**

There are those who ask why such importance is given to salvaging and protecting minority languages like Irish at all. But this is nothing new to the tradition of socialism. The Bolsheviks, and Lenin especially, recognised the rights of oppressed languages. Very quickly after the October Revolution, many of the minority languages from within the old Tsarist empire were recognised and given official status, and education and services were rolled out in these tongues.<sup>27</sup>

When Marx argued that human beings under capitalism are alienated from the fruits of their labour, and thus alienated from each other and society as a whole, he was absolutely correct. In the same manner, the repeated experience of being unable to interact with society in the language through which you think is no less alienating.

Socialists have always fought for bread, and for roses. Socialists fight for better economic circumstances, precisely because we also want a world where people are free and encouraged to express themselves in all their creativity, where they can live culturally-fulfilled lives. We should fight for resources for Irish schools but also for the aspect of Irish that is a key which unlocks rich cultural tapestries that have been evolving over many millennia. It is a language taught in schools and universities, but it also one in which people interpret the world, a language through which they count and curse and dream.

Yet much of the history of Irish is also a history of varying elites using and abusing it in pursuit of their own nefarious ends. It has often been trodden on in order to stir sectarian tensions, or used as a badge of honour for nationalist politicians to deflect attention from their anti-working-class right-wing policies. Much like partition, Irish cannot be ignored, and it is only through connecting the language struggle with the wider struggle for a fairer Ireland, that the ruling classes can be prevented from using the language to divide the rest of us.

Finally there is the issue of how we build solidarity in a neoliberal world, in which people are atomised and treated like cogs in a machine. A key facet of any socialist project - and a desired outcome in so much of the activity we undertake - is the building of solidarity among people. It is not an easy task in the face of the ever-present divide-and-conquer tactics of governments and employers. While mass movements and struggle-from-below are unmatched in their ability to wash away the muck of ages and forge that solidarity, it is important that we do not overlook culture in this regard. Ultimately capitalism needs to be overthrown at the source of its power, in the workplace where it extracts its profits. To do that will take a class that's united and resilient, one where solidarity is its defining feature. This rich cultural heritage available to us on our doorstep in the form of the Irish language can be a useful and empowering tool on the road to building strong and resilient class-based struggle.<sup>28</sup>

Socialists should stand with Irish language speakers. In the North they should support calls for a standalone Irish language act. They should demand everything be done to reverse the trajectory of Gaeltacht communities. And across Ireland, they should fight for the resources necessary to make it possible for people to live their lives through Irish.

### **Conclusion**

It's now nearly 40 years since Máirtín Ó Cadhain delivered that iconic speech at Comhdháil an Chomhchaidrimh in Donegal. In it he left his most prophetic statement: "Sé ina dhualgas ar lucht na Gaeilge a bheith ina sóisialaí!" ('It is the duty of the Irish language community to be socialists!'). It's hard to disagree with the moral sentiment in this statement; with much of the planet crumbling around us due to climate change, with racism and oppression an ever-present reality for far



too many, and with the ravaging effects of inequality and poverty a disgrace to behold in a society of plenty, it is indeed the duty of all of us to fight for a better world. But while I agree with Ó Cadhain, this article is an attempt to show that whatever about the moral duties we may feel we have, given the realities of capitalism in 21<sup>st</sup> century Ireland it is *in the interest* of all Gaeilgeoirí to be socialists.

Presenting us with a stark choice is the fact that the future of the language will be shaped irreversibly by our success in facing a *capitalist system* that pits person against person at the expense of all that is good in the world. Rosa Luxemburg famously proclaimed that the choice was between Socialism or Barbarism. In the case of languages, the potential barbarism before us is one where only a handful of imperial languages remain, while vast swathes of living, breathing human culture are lost to dust in the digital archives of the future. Socialists must, on a point of principle, fight against such a tragedy ever occurring.

Therefore, in 21<sup>st</sup> century Ireland, it may be time to build on Ó Cadhain's call to arms above. It is the duty of all socialists to fight for the Irish language. And it is in the interest of 'lucht na Gaeilge' to be socialists. On one side, there is the proud international socialist tradition of struggle, rooted in a strategic and historical analysis of *capitalism as it really exists*. On the other side there is the undampenable spirit of "Ná hAbair É Déan É" and the sheer propensity for communal solidarity made possible by the language and its culture. Side by side, they would be a force to be reckoned with.

#### Notes

- 1 Gluaiseacht na Gaeilge: Gluaiseacht ar Strae was the name given to the speech when it was published as a pamphlet. For a great overview of Ó Cadhain's political life and outlook see Ag Samhlú Troda by Aindrias Ó Cathasaigh (Coiscéim, 2012).
- 2 2016 Census statistics: <http://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cp10esil/p10esil/ilg/>
- 3 <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/statistics/2011-census/results>
- 4 Nuashonrú ar an Staidéar Cuimsitheach Teangeolaíoch ar Úsáid na Gaeilge sa Ghaeltacht: 2006-2011, Conchúr Ó Giollagáin & Martin Charlton, 2015.
- 5 <http://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cp10esil/p10esil/ilg/>
- 6 See <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/education/why-is-it-so-hard-to-get-a-place-in-a-gaelscoil-1.2984851>
- 7 See <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/irish-medium-schools> for the growth over the past fifteen years. The projected doubling of those children enrolled in the next seven years is based on internal Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta research.

8 See successive Céard É an Scéal? Public Opinion of the Irish Language reports from 2015, 2016 and 2017 available at: <https://www.peig.ie/en/rights/research-and-submissions>

9 Mac Ionnrachtaigh, Feargal (2013) Language, Resistance and Revival:

23. Alongside Mac Ionnrachtaigh, see Tomas Mac Siomoin's essay The Colonised Mind: Irish Language and Society and Tony Crowley's Language in History: Theories and Texts for introductions to how colonialism affected the Irish language.

10 Ó Croidheáin, Caoimhghín (2006) Language From Below: 300

11 Ó Ciasán, Éamon (1991), Buried Alive: A Reply to Reg Hindley's 'The Death of the Irish Language'.

12 The following breakdown is built upon the analysis of this period in Ó Croidheáin (2006).

13 After parents petitioned the Department of Education to start an Irish language primary school in Ballymun in the 60s, the parish priest issued the Department's reply from the altar one Sunday, saying that no school would be on the way. He then added that it was mad to expect working-class kids to be taught in Irish when they could barely learn anything in English. Parents eventually won their school, but the story, as told in Ó Croidheáin (2006), is indicative of the relationship between Church, State and Irish.

14 Ó Croidheáin (2006): 18

15 Allen, Kieran (2016) Into the Limelight: Tax Haven Ireland, *Irish Marxist Review* 16

16 Allen, Kieran (1990) Is Southern Ireland a Neo-colony? <http://www.marxists.de/ireland/neocolony/index.htm>

17 Mac Ionnrachtaigh (2013)

18 See virtually all expert research of minoritised languages. In particular, Joshua Fishman (1989, 1991, 2005).

19 Conradh na Gaeilge, Irish-Language & Gaeltacht Investment Plan (2017)

20 For more specific information as regards many of the reforms, policies, and investments required, see <https://cnag.ie/en/get-involved/current-campaigns.html>

21 See Conradh na Gaeilge's Discussion Document (2017) for more information on the potential content of an ILA.

22 Much of the following is based on Anwar Shaikh's excellent video lecture series on his book Capitalism, available at: [https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLB1uqxcCESK6Bijuh\\_wnKoxftZCcqAigo](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLB1uqxcCESK6Bijuh_wnKoxftZCcqAigo), as well as Colin Barker's discussion of competition in 'Some reflections on two books by Ellen Wood', *Historical Materialism* (1997) 1(1).

23 For discussions of the revival in Belfast at this time see Mac Ionnrachtaigh (2013), and D'imigh Sin agus Tháinig Seo (2010) by Séamas Mac Seáin.

24 Based on internal Conradh na Gaeilge figures.

25 <https://cnag.ie/en/get-involved/current-campaigns/gaelvota.html>

26 <http://eamonnmallie.com/2018/02/stormont-exclusive-draft-agreement-text-eamonn-mallie-brian-rowan/>

27 Brandist, Craig (2015) The Dimensions of Hegemony: Language, Culture and Politics in Revolutionary Russia: Ch.1& Ch. 7.

28 There is more to be said here, however it comes from my own experiences in the Irish language movement combined with what I think are compelling arguments put forward by Vivek Chibber, in Rescuing Class from the Cultural Turn in Catalyst 1(1), about the role of culture in class formation.