

Speech for KKE conference
Athens, Monday 7 April 2008

Thank you very much for inviting the Communist Party of Ireland to speak at this important conference. We congratulate you on the initiative; we would also like to thank you for the respect you show to our views—a respect, I might add, that the European Parliament does not share. On 20 February this year the European Parliament, including the Irish Labour Party member Proinsias de Rossa, voted by 499 to 129 *against* a motion to respect the outcome of the Irish referendum.

The European Union, Ireland, and the CPI

I would like to start with a few quotations, whose essence should be kept in mind when we are analysing the European Union. The first is by the foremost Irish Marxist and revolutionary who was shot by firing squad in 1916, James Connolly; the second is a famous quotation from Lenin.

Connolly said: "There can be no perfect Europe in which Ireland is denied even the least of its national rights." As Lenin argued so well, "from the standpoint of the economic conditions of imperialism—i.e. the export of capital and the division of the world by the 'advanced' and 'civilised' colonial powers—a United States of Europe, under capitalism, is either impossible or reactionary."

Events have shown that monopoly capitalism can build a united Europe even on a temporary basis, but it is most certainly reactionary.

The position of the Communist Party of Ireland with regard to the European Union and the Treaty of Lisbon is determined by our historical experience and our understanding of imperialism and by our opposition to imperialism in Ireland and in the world. This position is amplified in the political resolution of our party's 23rd National Congress, from which I quote:

"The CPI has been opposed to the Common Market since its inception and in particular since the whole of the country joined . . . There continues to be a debate within the European labour movement over whether a 'United States of Europe' is good or bad for working people. The economic forces driving EU integration . . . do not use such categories as 'good' or 'bad': their values are based upon the maximisation of profits, market share, market penetration, labour availability, and global strategies of domination. Their economic and political class interests guide them."

Since the European Steel and Coal Community was established in 1952, each successive treaty has been for strengthening the economic and political domination of monopoly capitalism and its ruling class in larger and larger areas of Europe and of the world. The forces driving this process are monopoly capitalism and imperialism and not—and this is the fundamental point—not the people of Europe. We are on the verge of a European superstate, created by and for monopoly capitalism. As the Belgian Prime Minister put it, “the Constitution is the capstone of a European federal state.”

The terms “social Europe” and “social market” are often used in connection with this project, and they are used to confuse and disguise a very real process of domination and alienation that has been developing over the years of European integration. Progressive legislation in Europe was a concession made to working-class struggle in the light of the existence of socialism in the Soviet Union and eastern Europe. At each negotiating table western European workers had an invisible partner in their Soviet comrades.

A very real fear of social revolution, together with strong trade unions and communist parties, forced the hand of the establishment. But these few concessions were given only to guarantee the survival of the ruling class and its order in Europe. With an alternative economic system no longer present in Europe, and with the subsequently weakened communist parties and trade unions, the European elite are now leading a race to the bottom in workers’ conditions—all in the name of development, progress, and democracy.

Both the Republic and Northern Ireland (as part of the United Kingdom) joined the European project in 1973. Since then we have been hearing that all good things in our country have come from Europe. As I mentioned, while some progressive legislation originated Europe, it results in fact from class struggle. And Irish people with their own resources pressed for and achieved the legalisation of contraceptives and divorce legislation—not Europe. The fourth week of paid annual holidays came from union negotiation in Ireland, not Europe.

But by far the most oft-repeated claim is that we have the European Union to thank for Ireland’s “booming” capitalist economy. This ignores the fact that Switzerland and Norway, neither members of the European Union, have equally seen significant growth in their economies. Irish economic development can be attributed more to foreign direct investment, and a regressive tax system with an extremely low corporate taxation policy, than to the European Union.

Today, 80 per cent of laws in Ireland come from Brussels; and it is estimated that 80 per cent of those laws were never even debated by any democratically accountable body. Do we know, or have we adequate access to, those who draw up this legislation? No: the democratic deficit in Europe is great, and its disdain for democracy penetrates into our own bourgeois democracies. Secrecy and cloak-and-dagger politics have been central to the process of European integration.

Now we are facing the Treaty of Lisbon, virtually the same treaty as was rejected by the French and Dutch people in 2005; as the head of the Irish government put it, "Thankfully, they haven't changed any of the substance."

Reasons for the Irish referendum

Why is Ireland voting on this treaty? Believe me, it is not because our establishment cares more for democracy than, say, the French, German, or Greek. The Irish government is constitutionally obliged to hold a referendum. This is an important point to make. It is not the Irish government that is giving us a referendum, it is the Constitution of Ireland. In 1982 the government hoped to ratify the Single European Act by legislation; however, a successful case was taken in the courts, and it was ruled that as sovereignty derives from the people, as described in the Constitution, any transfer of sovereignty must be voted upon by the people.

However, it is vitally important to note that if it is passed in June this year, this will more than likely be the last referendum we will see on European integration, for the 28th Amendment to the Constitution Bill, which we will be voting on, states: "No provision of this Constitution invalidates laws enacted, acts done or measures adopted by the State that are necessitated by membership of the European Union or prevents laws enacted, acts done or measures adopted by the said European Union or by its institutions thereof . . . from having the force of law in this State."

In other words, laws or directives adopted by the European Union take precedence over existing laws and even over the Constitution. Nowhere more clearly is the subject nature of the Irish state more clearly expressed. Added to this is the fact that there are a number of clauses in the Treaty of Lisbon—most notably the "Flexibility Clause" (article 352 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union) and the "Simplified Treaty Revision Procedure" (article 48 of

the amended Treaty on European Union)—that make it a virtually self-amending treaty. By voting Yes in the referendum we would be handing a blank cheque to European monopoly capitalism and its ruling class to do with us as they please.

Analysis and impact of the Treaty of Lisbon

Our analysis of European integration and specifically of the Lisbon Treaty is based on our experience and our understanding of imperialism. We have no doubts about the forces behind integration and consequently of the nature of the European Union and of this treaty. However, it is vitally important and necessary for the campaign for a No vote that we study this treaty, comprehend it, and understand its full ramifications.

A number of areas of this treaty affect Ireland significantly. These can be broken down into the broad area of democracy, sovereignty, economy and workers' rights, and foreign policy and militarisation; however, we must always remember that in imperialism there is no separation of economy from politics, or of politics from military activity.

Democracy

It was the Laeken Declaration that suggested that another treaty was needed to further the "efficient running" of the European Union. A convention was established to draft a constitution. During this convention thousands of amendments were submitted by representatives, the vast majority of which were never translated, never distributed, never discussed, and never voted upon. This was the so-called "consensus method" by which the Commission claims the original constitution was drafted.

The draft constitution, as we all know, was then rejected by the French and Dutch people. Before this it had been ratified by a number of parliaments, some of which—such as that of Latvia—had never even had the constitution translated into their own language.

We are now at the stage of ratifying or—in Ireland's case—voting on the Treaty of Lisbon, of which the Chancellor of Germany, Angela Merkel, has said, "The fundamentals of the rejected constitution have been maintained in large part . . . We have renounced everything that makes people think of a state, like the flag and the national anthem." The essence of the constitution rejected by the French and Dutch people remains. To quote the chairperson of the

convention that drew up the constitution, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, "public opinion will be led to adopt, without knowing it, the proposals that we dare not present to them directly."

Here let me show you a fine example of this tactic: the Irish government's White Paper or explanatory document on the Lisbon Treaty, just published. You will notice throughout the document that there are a number of very nice yellow boxes. These draw our attention to the parts that best sell the treaty—all the nice rights we are guaranteed. The document fails, however, to draw our attention to the following parts, which undermine everything guaranteed in the nice yellow box.

Sovereignty

The question of sovereignty is extremely important. Increasingly, liberal-left and bourgeois-idealist notions of the non-existence or non-importance of sovereignty are leaking into progressive groups. The Communist Party of Ireland believes that the question of sovereignty is not only relevant with regard to this treaty but is absolutely critical.

The reason we in Ireland have the right to a referendum is a question of sovereignty. As Marxists, we understand sovereignty not as a fixed idealist concept but as a reality that is pushed, pulled and fought over in the class struggles within bourgeois nation-states in the contemporary world. What enables the European Union to legislate in more and more areas is sovereignty. This treaty is intended to increase the sovereignty of the European Union in thirty-two new areas. As the Prime Minister of Luxembourg stated, "Of course there will be transfers of sovereignty. But would it be intelligent to draw the attention of public opinion to this fact?"

This growing cohesion of the European Union into a consolidated imperialist bloc, increasingly speaking and acting in accord, will have serious consequences for global politics in such areas as the United Nations and global trade discussions. If we take the example of the United Nations, if the European Union adopts a position on a particular issue the "high representative" or foreign minister could demand to speak on behalf of the European Union, and member-states would have to cede to it and vote accordingly as one.

The supremacy of European law and, most importantly, interpretation and meaning given to European laws and directives come from the European Court of

Justice. In the "Declaration Concerning Primacy" it is noted that, "in accordance with well settled case law of the EU Court of Justice, the Treaties and the law adopted by the Union on the basis of the Treaties have primacy over the law of Member States, under the conditions laid down by the said case law." The statement of the Council Legal Service of June 2007 has added: "It results from the case-law of the Court of Justice that primacy of EC law is a cornerstone principle of Community law. According to the Court, this principle is inherent to the specific nature of the European Community."

Economy and workers' rights

This erosion of sovereignty and the supremacy of the role played by the European Court of Justice is critical in the area of workers' rights and of union struggle. It has recently become more than evident through the Laval, Viking and Ruffert cases that it is the European Court of Justice upholding the rights of big business that is leading the erosion of workers' rights and conditions.

The so-called "Charter of Fundamental Rights" is championed in Ireland by the Labour Party as more progressive legislation granted to us by Europe. Unions are "granted" the right to strike by the charter; however, one would do well to read further and read the many "explanations" that have been added and that nullify any rights given in the charter. One such explanation states: "Restrictions may be imposed on the exercise of those rights, in particular in the context of a common organization of the market." The precedent has already been established in the Laval and Viking cases in the private sector, and this has been further compounded by the most recent Ruffert case, which makes it applicable now in the public sector

So the Charter of Fundamental Rights applies only when it doesn't interfere with the rights of the market. The European Court has confirmed this. This court plays a central role in imperialism's institution-building in Europe, facilitating the race to the bottom in workers' conditions, where competition with the lowest common denominator rules the day.

We have the experience of well-paid jobs being replaced by lower-paid ones in Irish Ferries and among the GAMA construction workers. We now have tens of thousands of agency workers employed throughout the Irish economy, which is leading to growing tensions among workers as wages and conditions continue to be pushed downwards.

Article 2 of the Lisbon Treaty makes "price stability" an aim of the European Union. This no doubt would be used to exert pressure on member-states to reduce public spending. Whatever about the rest of the EU member-states, in Ireland there is a crying need for greater investment in health and education. Decisions relating to the "trade" in health and education services will now be decided by majority vote by the Council of Ministers.

We know that for some time the Commission has been pushing to create a common consolidated tax base. Article 48 of the Lisbon Treaty would permit the European Council to move from unanimity to qualified majority in several areas, including company taxation. We know that the Commission has already drafted proposals for introducing a "common EU tax base" for company taxes but has put it on hold, like the Health Services Directive, until the ratification process has been completed.

At present an intense struggle is taking place within the trade union movement, not just in Ireland but throughout the European Union, as the much-touted "social Europe" disappears like snow off a tree on a warm day. Today a seminar is taking place in Ireland, hosted jointly by the largest trade union, SIPTU, and the largest craft union, TEEU, to discuss the Treaty of Lisbon. This would have been unheard of were it not for the Viking, Laval and now Ruffert cases. We now believe that we may secure a neutral position by the trade union movement; this would be a significant step forward from the blind following of both the government and the ETUC that they have given to previous treaties.

Militarisation

Finally, militarisation is a vital issue for Ireland. You may or may not know that the Irish state has a history of military neutrality. Again, like sovereignty, this is not a fixed concept. We are not either neutral or not neutral: our level of progressive neutrality reflects the class struggle in Ireland and in the world at large.

The origins of neutrality in Ireland go back to the 1700s, when Theobald Wolfe Tone, a radical bourgeois democrat, espoused the idea of neutrality in the English-Spanish Wars of colonial conquest, for Irish democratic advantage. Neutrality was also argued by James Connolly in founding the Irish Neutrality League in opposition to the imperialist First World War, developing similar arguments to Lenin.

The Lisbon Treaty sets about framing a common security, defence and foreign policy. It is clear from mutual defence provisions in article 28A (7) and the "Solidarity Clause," article 188R, that they would profoundly affect the character of Irish security and defence policy and would mark the final end of Irish neutrality and, we would argue, of the neutrality of those other EU neutral states.

The treaty states that this "shall include joint disarmament operations, humanitarian and rescue tasks, military advice and assistance tasks, conflict prevention and peace-keeping tasks, tasks of combat forces in crisis management, including peace-making and post-conflict stabilization. All these tasks may contribute to the fight against terrorism, including by supporting third countries in combating terrorism in their territories." These are sweeping powers to be given to the European Union. We know from experience that "terrorism" in the hands of imperialism is a very broad concept and at times may even come to include industrial action by workers when they have construed such action as endangering the stability of the state.

With this treaty the opportunity to change policy, both nationally and at the EU level, would be greatly reduced. This is a grab for absolute power, free of democratic checks and devoid of accountability. It would set in concrete the course and direction of the European Union and give maximum power and influence to the larger states, making it almost impossible to change.

There are important theoretical questions facing us today. What is the nature of what is being constructed here in Europe? Is it a "normal" bourgeois state, or is it something different—a state deliberately constructed by and for monopoly capitalism at the international level—an imperialist state?

From our experience we do not believe that this body can be democratised from within, for what is being constructed is the antithesis of democracy.

The No campaign

The Communist Party of Ireland believes that at this stage we need to mobilise the maximum opposition to the growing concentration of power and decision-making and the undermining of democracy within the European Union. We believe that this struggle is both democratic and anti-imperialist.

It is our view that we need to mobilise a wide spectrum of Irish public life in this struggle on the basis of democracy, sovereignty, the protection of public

services, and the defence of neutrality.

This is fundamentally an anti-imperialist struggle. We are fighting this referendum on the grounds of democracy, sovereignty, the defence of the public sector, of workers' rights, and international solidarity.