

Shell to Sea public meeting

Last night more than seventy people gathered in the ATGWU Hall in Middle Abbey Street to discuss the continuing scandal that is the Corrib gas field development. Interesting and detailed speeches were delivered by Mícheál Ó Seighin, Patricia McKenna, and Frank Connolly. Half an hour of open-floor contributions and debate followed, with several impassioned orations being delivered by stalwarts of the campaign and newcomers alike.

The meeting began (a little later than scheduled!) at about 7:30, with Joanne McDonald of Dublin Shell to Sea introducing the speakers and welcoming the participants.

Mícheál Ó Seighin, one of the five men from Rosspoint jailed for 94 days at the behest of Shell, spoke first. Mícheál spoke of the situation both past and present in the Erris region, the political corruption that led to the crisis, and of his hopes for the future of the campaign and of a successful resolution both for the Erris people and for the entire citizenship of the country. Mícheál added that the repression faced daily by the local opponents of the project in its present form was indeed severe. He described how a fire at the perimeter of the refinery site had been attributed in some quarters of the compliant corporate media to campaigners, whereas it was a rubbish fire being burnt by elements involved in the project too lazy (or is that “too cost-effective”?) to bring the refuse to the nearest dump.

He also pointed out that local bureaucrats could not be counted on for assistance, for they themselves were toeing the line of the transnationals involved and were cogs in the wheel of what he eloquently described as “an unholy alliance of state and capital.” One particularly recent example of this was given of the county council’s decision to accept an offer of €3 million from Shell for road upgrading. This unashamedly crass offer, shrouded in a façade of altruistic motive, was accepted almost unreservedly by the council lapdogs. But Mícheál ended on a more upbeat note, with a firm affirmation that the struggle has a long way to run and that the local community was far from beaten.

The next speaker was Frank Connolly, journalist and author of the Centre for Public Inquiry’s report into the Corrib gas controversy (<http://www.publicinquiry.ie/reports.php>). Frank gave a very detailed and fascinating insight into the murky world of political donations, corruption and corporate influence that has plagued the Irish political system for the past few decades. Having attended Dublin Castle earlier in the day as the Mahon Tribunal continues digging up the dirt on the political establishment, Frank explained how the intricate web of dodgy deals could not have been far removed from the alteration of the terms for oil and gas exploration in favour of the exploiters in the late 1980s and early 90s. Several new payments had been discussed yesterday at the tribunal, all lodgements and withdrawals of large amounts of cash or cheques into accounts with suggestible titles such as BT, for “Bertie and Tim [Collins].” The assembled crowd were left in no doubt following the comprehensive twenty-minute description given by Frank Connolly that there had been some back-handed dealing before the drafting and passing of the Finance Act (1992)—which reduced the tax payable from 50 per cent to 25 per cent—and indeed that it was the oil and gas lobby, led by Marathon Oil, that had in effect drafted the new terms and has employed their bosom buddies in power to implement it. Frank finished by saying that he felt that the battle for Shell to Sea was going to be an uphill one but that, as with the successful anti-nuclear mobilisation in the 1970s, such battles were winnable with perseverance and a diverse array of tactics.

Last to speak from the top table was Patricia McKenna, former member of the European Parliament and seasoned campaigner. Patricia opened by outlining just how outrageous the terms of the project are for the Irish people and how the give-away is so utterly reprehensible, particularly in the present climate of drastically under-funded public services, such as health and education. She left the audience in no doubt that she was more than a little unhappy with the performance of her Green Party colleagues in ministerial positions since their joining the Government. Adding to this, she stated that big business now had a controlling interest in the running of our economy and society in general and that they had very little difficulty maintaining, this given the present Government’s complete accession to all their demands.

Patricia emphasised that it was not just the political establishment—including now, of course, the Green Party—that was toeing the corporate line but that the corporate media had done nothing but facilitate the lies of the state and Shell in relation to the campaign and its constituent elements—hardly surprising when one of Ireland’s biggest media moguls, Tony O’Reilly, is the controlling shareholder (40.3 per cent) of Providence Oil, a company now preparing to exploit the rich oil and gas field off the coast of Co. Clare.

Contributions were then heard from the floor for about twenty-five minutes, with several impassioned orations being delivered and numerous questions being directed at the panel. One interesting question was addressed to Mícheál, on whether or not he felt there would be further imprisonments of campaigners. Mícheál replied that he was in doubt whatsoever that more people would be sent to jail for their actions, and that he hoped but was not certain that there would not be serious injury or death, such is the level of brutality and the disregard for safety being displayed by various elements forcing the project through against the wishes of the local community and in violation of many aspects of the law.

One commentator countered Patricia McKenna’s point that “you’ll always get a few trouble-makers who grasp every chance to oppose state authority” with the attestation that what we need are “trouble-makers”—people who stand up for their rights and make trouble for Shell and the state, people like the Rosspoint Five and the Shell to Sea campaign, people who will show up the current Government, particularly the Green Party, for how they have now “buried their snouts” in the trough of power. Another commentator emphasised how we need to link the present situation with the Lisbon Treaty and the giving away of much of our autonomy to a European superstate. Patricia took up this point, outlining exactly how such a give-away as this will only lead to further give-aways similar to the natural resources sell-out.

This was altogether an interesting and successful public meeting.

Dublin Shell to Sea meets every Tuesday at 6:30 p.m. in Connolly Books, 43 East Essex Street, Dublin. All are welcome.